A Museum Educator Asks How We Can Feel Closer to Art

With the teaching galleries at the Blanton Museum now being closed, as a museum educator there I can’t but help ponder how an art experience of close looking with our eyes, our bodies, and our breath might translate in our post-pandemic future.

Come closer. Yes – let’s gather around together. Very close. Think about forming a half-circle, one where we are in proximity to each other, and the work of art. That way we can create an arc of energy, potency, present-ness between ourselves and the object of our attention. This artwork. We can see clearly now and listen attentively to each other. But wait . . . Come a little closer, even. You can’t see the details of this artwork from way back there.

This is the invitation I make to the university student groups I work with at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin. I make this invitation in front of a large painting about constructing identity,
such as “Parade (diptych)” (2007) by Mequitta Ahuja, which is in our permanent collection galleries; or I beckon students to come close to works on paper in our H-E-B Study Room, to look at prints about the AIDS epidemic by artist and psychiatrist Eric Avery. Perhaps we are looking through viewfinders or employing blindfolds while guiding partners to imagine the unseen, or observing the artwork from unexpected viewpoints — beneath, above, or from an oblique angle. The invitation is the same. Move closer together as a group. Move closer to the artwork. Be vulnerable in this moment of ambiguity and intimacy. And extend your trust to me — a stranger — as I lead you in a slow looking experience in front of works of art.

As a museum educator for university audiences, I am constantly on the lookout for courses on campus that connect to our permanent collection galleries and special exhibitions. My goal is to bring students — from freshmen to graduate level in all disciplines — into the galleries so they can have an immersive experience with artwork, one that is meaningful and full of purpose and a sense of belonging. When student groups gather around, at first hesitant and unsure, in the Rapaport Atrium surrounded by “Stacked Waters” (2009) and beneath “Siphonophora” (2016), I welcome them and ask them to come even closer, closer to each other and to me — closer than they are comfortable being. With this embodied discomfort, I then invite them to be open to the ambiguity of looking at something unfamiliar and to share their observations, thoughts, and feelings as we look and make meaning together. In a small way, perhaps, share our stories.

My invitation to move closer stems from the nostalgic wish to be around an African campfire in the twilit bush, waiting for stories to be shared. As a white girl of Scottish immigrant parents growing up in apartheid and post-apartheid Johannesburg, I became acutely aware of the privilege of personal space and the complexities inherent within the notion of belonging. People of color who were forced to live in segregated spaces displayed a physical closeness to each other and a joy in human touch that was seldom encountered in my community’s public social interactions. In contrast, Black people touched — friends, family, and strangers — interjoining personal space. Hands are held, shoulders grasped, heads rest crown to crown. Living in South Africa for most of my life has shifted my own sense of personal space. I bring this cultural perspective with me as I teach in the galleries, shrinking our personal bubbles to be closer, side-by-side, sometimes with crowns almost touching as we look. My invitation to move closer may be compelling to students because this begins the journey of intimacy between our group and the artwork, an intimacy that I equally crave.

With this close proximity of our bodies — seated on gallery stools or standing together — we create a space for shared conversation and sustained collective looking, a physical barrier of bodies separate from the curiosity of other patrons. It is as if we are in a magical bubble of suspended time, encouraging vulnerable, thoughtful, and respectful engagement with the often unfamiliar experience of looking at art in union.

Perhaps after looking at figurative artwork on a sixty-minute gallery experience, we may end by contemplating Mary Corse’s abstract painting, “Untitled” (1969). At first glance — and from fifty feet away — we encounter a large, white square canvas consisting of a grid of five rows with five squares, each square with brushwork striations forming regular patterns, some corner to corner, vertical or horizontal. At this
point, students are invited to huddle close together — like a shoal of fish. The invitation is unusual, to be sure, and initially came about as a playful and improvisational experiment with a willing student group (one whose eyes were alight with the joy of the unknown). In that moment, though, our exaggerated closeness seems to spark an intensity of looking. Perhaps there is a certain adrenaline generated when we are in each other’s personal space, adrenaline that heightens our senses to the collective act of looking and being present in the moment. Additionally, being close together in a huddle means we are able to look at the artwork from a similar point of view and in similar lighting conditions.

From the furthest point in the gallery from Mary Corse’s painting, we come together in a moment of shared, mindful breathing. I lead them in a simple set of conscious breathing for a count of 10. Becoming more present to themselves through this, I encourage students to use the grid of the painting as a focus for their breath and their eye. It becomes a type of breathing/seeing board. Breathe in on the diagonal and breathe out on the vertical. Mindfulness finds an entry point in the object. After a series of inhalations and exhalations, correlating breath and eye movement, I might invite a short response from the closely gathered group. Some ideas that often emerge and are shared: “it looks dull;” “uninteresting;” “misty;” “is reminiscent of bathroom tiles;” “my parents’ kitchen floor;” “marble-like;” “smoky;” “consists of 25 smaller squares;” “it reminds me of a childhood experience in my family home;” “looks like a window with falling rain;” “like a chessboard;” “a child’s game.”

We move a little closer now, to 20 feet away, but still keep close together. By being close, we heighten the experience. What more can you see from this perspective? They share new thoughts and details that emerge, after more time looking and being present with this artwork: “the grooves between the squares are clearer now;” “the direction of the painted brush marks more evident;” “it feels like the surface plane of the canvas is opening up or going backwards in space;” “perhaps it is an open window;” “the surface feels more atmospheric;” “the edge around the square grid is a crisper white;” “it feels heavy and cold to the touch;” “I can feel the wind from the open window blowing on my face.”

What happens when we move even closer — right up to an arm’s length away? Now a slight gasp erupts as students notice the surface sheen and iridescent glimmer, and the silhouettes of their bodies projected on the surface of the luminescent canvas. Their bodies are now part of this artwork. They are inside the painting. The students comment on how their physical proximity and the changing light activates the painted surface in unexpected ways. And their shared thoughts expand our interpretation. I ask the group, “Who of you would have initially walked straight past this artwork without a further glance if on your own in the galleries?” Almost all hands are raised. The hidden beauty of the glass beads (microspheres) embedded in white acrylic paint, like sandpaper or powdered snow when seen from the edge of the painted surface, are only evident from up close. This materiality is a joyful discovery and a gentle reminder for us to suspend judgement upon first encounters. Knowing that Mary Corse was just 24 years old when she made this painting — not much older than many of the students in the group — and yet still uses this
material in her painting 50 years later, coaxes us to keep our passion alive. I love to share the story about how the youthful Mary Corse created this paint, first by seeing a problem to solve and then looking closely at the world around her for a creative solution. In this extended time of looking together, our curiosity has been piqued by listening to each other’s perspectives, sometimes hearing quieter classmates for the first time. This artwork calls us to slow down and to notice, to pay attention by being present — never knowing what gifts may abound when we take the time to look — closely, and together — tightly knit.

With the teaching galleries now being closed, I scroll through my photo stream of students engaged in past gallery experiences. The striking difference between these photos of students being in close proximity to each other and artwork and news images of social distancing, is devastating. I can’t but help ponder how this art experience of close looking with our eyes, our bodies, and our breath might translate in our post-pandemic future. Up until the week before spring break, we were looking at artworks in this way, not fearful of germs, or moisture particles from our breath hanging in the air or being so close as to rub shoulders. How will students feel as they return to campus life after months or longer of social distancing and isolation? How will our gallery experiences meet students’ needs for processing collective trauma — a trauma globally experienced? How will the invitation to form a social bond of togetherness while looking at art be received, especially if being in close proximity still poses a vital threat to our physical well-being? How will our students now respond to an invitation to move closer? What will the gallery visit look like from this new perspective? How will this new placement of our bodies in space, erode the social experience of looking together, and how will it shape the way we experience artwork?

I am an optimist, trained as an artist, and see this conundrum of embodied, post-pandemic gallery experiences with works of art, as another intriguing problem to creatively solve. Taking my cue from Mary Corse, I will look for new solutions that are joyful and surprising. When our student groups are again looking at art in the galleries, I commit to creating learning experiences that respond to the urgency of the time, yet still connects with our shared humanity.

- Siobhan McCusker