



Through the ARTS

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Susan Rosoff, Associate

@ 2012

JAMES SIENA



James Siena
Sequence One, 2009
Accordion bound
book, 36 relief prints
on masa paper, each
image, 17 x 13 inches

Arts Integration: Visual Art and Language Arts

Target Audience: Grades 4-12

Description: Students explore ideas of assembling and disassembling in writing and patterns in artwork.

Curricular Objectives:

Visual Art: Students examine, analyze, and interpret a work of art. Students respond to the work of James Siena by creating an artwork with a pattern that grows and then is disassembled.

English/Language Arts: Students analyze the compositional form and action in *This is the House that Jack Built*. Students “disassemble” the story by writing a new ending to the story, while still keeping the form of the poem.

Lesson Logistics:

Materials: Internet connection and means to project images and video for viewing
For Language Arts/English part of the lesson:
Paper and pen or pencil
The House that Jack Built



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For the Visual Art part of the lesson:

Long, narrow strips of paper that can be folded into an accordion style book.

Drawing materials

Video of pages being turned in James Siena's *Sequence One*

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gregleibowitz/4710350041/>

A view of how one side of the accordion book unfolded so that the sequential change is visible:

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=147182

The 36 pages of the accordion book are laid on a grid so that it is possible to see each page:

<http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1920&prints=1>

(There is a photograph of Siena and several of his artworks on this site; you need to scroll down a way to find the grid of images.)

A similar work by James Siena, *Two Sequences, Two Variations*, 2010 can be found on the last page of this lesson.

Space: Classroom

Vocabulary

Visual Art: assembly, disassembly, sequence, abstraction

English/Language Arts: journalism

Lesson Procedure:

Starting the Lesson:

Share a video of a gallery assistant turning the pages of the artist book of prints by James Siena. Ask students to notice what changes as the pages turn.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gregleibowitz/4710350041/>

- Describe what you saw in the video.
- How did the artwork change? (*there were additions and subtractions – the prints got more complicated, and then became simpler again*)

Building the Lesson:

Explain that Siena did 36 prints and he printed on each side of the paper. Show the Museum of Modern Art's picture of Siena's accordion book standing open.



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- Explain that Siena did 36 prints and he printed on each side of the paper. Show the Museum of Modern Art's picture of Siena's accordion book standing open: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=147182
- Describe what the first pages of the print look like.
- Moving from left to right, what does Siena add to the pattern?
- Do the additions seem random or purposeful? What makes you think so?
- Why do you think Siena chose the accordion book format for his 36 prints?

Take a closer look at how the prints in the accordion book change.

Show the sequence of photographs at

<http://www.booklyn.org/artists/James%20Siena,%20New%20York,%20NY.php>.

- What do you see happening here?

Now look at the grid of all the pages together to determine how Siena's concept developed.

<http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1920&prints=1>

Siena created a geometric abstraction by taking line as a basic unit and repeating multiple times with changes in length and color.

- Which lines are the same lengths?
- Where do the lines begin to change? What happens to the lines as you go through the sequence of pages?
- What colors does Siena use?
- Where do the colors change?
- What is the pattern of change? (*Siena explained that the sequence goes forward on one side of the book, and then reverses itself on the other side of the book; in reversed pattern, the colors are printed in reverse*)

Think about these statements made by James Siena. How do they relate to *Sequence One*?

(From: <http://www.booklyn.org/artists/James%20Siena,%20New%20York,%20NY.php>)

- "...once the book idea came along, it was...an opportunity to...make a continuous folded book with all of the moves represented in a cumulative sequence, going forward on one side and 'undoing itself' in reverse colors on the other side."

(All the following statements come from an article at this website:

<http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1920&prints=1>)

- "Colors are very useful for keeping shapes apart."
 - What colors does Siena use?
 - Where do you think color is the most important in this print?
 - Do you agree that color is useful for keeping shapes apart, or do you see the use of color differently? Please explain.
 - How does color add to the complexity of this form?
- "Sometimes the decisions happen during the process of making the [print], but sometimes the decisions happen before."



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- What do you think happened with this print? Why?
- “Each [print] has to do with carrying out a procedure, not matter how simple. It’s the task of making it physical.”
 - How do you think Siena defined the procedure for this print?
 - If James Siena kept going with the additions and subtractions, what would the end result be? On the MoMA website, look at the colors of the end pages in each sequence. How do these match with your prediction?

The House that Jack Built

Note: If you cannot get the book *The House that Jack Built* at your local library, the poem is available here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_Is_the_House_That_Jack_Built

The story, *The House that Jack Built*, is a wonderful example of “assembly” in writing. The poem begins: “This is the house that Jack built.

With each line, something new is revealed about Jack’s house. For example.

“This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.”

Point out that the story also follows two patterns: 1) the lines rhyme and 2) the last line always ends with “the house that Jack built.”

Un-Write the Story

Write a new ending to *The House that Jack Built* by disassembling the story.

For example, consider starting with the phrase “In the house that Jack built” for each line.

Then invent what happens to all of the characters named in the poem,

In the house that Jack built

The rat got fat and ran away

And malt was still there today.

Have students work in groups to brainstorm a logical disassembly of the story and ways to rhyme the lines. Then have students share the ways they solved the problem.

In the Studio

James Siena works with a predetermined set of rules that he puts into action in his artwork.

To create your own design, what rule will you operate by to assemble and then disassemble a pattern? For example, you might start by intersecting wavy lines and straight lines; certain bands of color that grow or repeat in a certain order; or shapes that touch on the sides, or intersect.

When you decide on the procedure you’ll use to create your pattern, write it down.



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Fold a narrow piece of paper like an accordion book. (Although James Siena's accordion book stretches 17 feet long, you don't have to make your book that long!) Create enough panels in your folding that the pattern has room to develop. On one side of the paper, make the pattern grow, and on the other side have the same pattern diminish by reversing.

Sharing

One thing that is important to artists is having the opportunity to share their work. Have students share their accordion books and explain the sequence used in assembling and disassembling their patterns.

Summary:

Ideas of assembly and disassembly interest James Siena. His multiple additions and subtractions create patterns that are abstract but intriguing. We want to understand the logic of where he goes with his pattern.

In *The House that Jack Built*, the author's rule in assembling the story was to have rhyming lines and to repeat the same phrase at the end of every verse. We disassembled the story by writing a new ending, while still using the author's "rules" about rhyming and repetition of a phrase.

Documentation:

In the classroom or media center, display students' accordion books. To help viewers' understanding, include each artist's statement of the rule used to create his/her sequence.

To Do another Day:

- Look at Ed Emberly's book, *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* (This book is for young children, but remember, an adult wrote and illustrated it.) The book is a perfect example of assembly and disassembly, as a big green monster grows page by page into a really scary face, and disassembles piece by piece until nothing is left. What seems like a simple book is created through a sophisticated series of die-cuts. Try making a similar style book using principles of assembly and disassembly: create strategically placed holes that reveal a little peek at a time
- Write instructions on how to assemble and disassemble a simple machine. David Macauley's book, *The Way Things Work*, might provide a helpful starting point. He includes drawings of all sorts of machines with descriptions of how they run.
- Artist Sol LeWitt made many prints. Like Siena, he was guided by his own procedure and set of rules for creating a pattern. For paintings, he often gave his instructions to others to execute.



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Here are two simple sets of instructions that students can quickly execute on a small piece of paper. Everyone's image will be different. When students finish, show them what LeWitt's print looked like.

Draw horizontal bands – more or less.

<http://www.solle Wittprints.org/lewitt-raisonne-2002-05>

Straight and not straight lines

<http://www.solle Wittprints.org/lewitt-raisonne-2003-01>

- Roberta Smith, an art critic for *The New York Times*, once compared James Siena's artwork to Agnes Martin paintings. (Retrieved March 26, 2012, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500E0DA1E30F935A35752C0A9609C8B63>) Siena said, "I don't see the relationship at all." (Retrieved March 16, 2012 <http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1920&prints=1>) Make a case why there is or is not a relationship between the art of these two artists. A variety of Agnes Martin paintings are at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3787&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1
- In the article cited above, Robert Smith compared Siena's artwork to "Andean textiles, Chinese bronzes, and African bark painting...and calligraphy." Compare and contrast items from some of these categories with Siena's prints.
 - Andean textiles
 - http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/2091?search_id=6
 - http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Inca_Civilization
 - Chinese bronzes
 - http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/c/chinese_bronze_bell.aspx and
 - <http://image0-rubylane.s3.amazonaws.com/shops/uniquitiesunlimited/00176.1L.jpg?46>
 - African bark painting
 - <http://pardeecollection.com/pygmy.html>
 - Calligraphy
 - <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2004.88>

Resources:

See additional James Siena prints done at Flying Horse Editions here:

<http://flyinghorse.cah.ucf.edu/artists.php?id=siena>

These children's books deal in different ways with ideas of assembly and disassembly

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat by Simms Taback.



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This Caldecott Award winning book, included on *The New York Times* bestseller list, recounts the story of a tailor who changes his overcoat to a jacket, the jacket to a vest, the vest to a scarf, etc. As the fabric wears out, he makes something smaller and smaller until the only remaining fabric is used for a fabric-covered button. (disassembly) When he loses the button, no fabric remains. You would think the book would end here, and so it does, but not before Joseph announces that he will write a story about all the changes he made to the original overcoat. Making something new is another angle on assembly.

The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

In this classic, the concepts of assembly and disassembly are more about usage. The tree is an integral part of a boy's life, but as he grows older he stays away and the tree is sad. The tree gives its all when the boy cuts it down to make a boat. There is nothing left. (disassembly) But the boy – who is now elderly – comes back and sits on the stump of the tree to rest, and the tree is useful again. (assembly)

Background:

While growing up in California, **James Siena** was most influenced by an after school art teacher because she taught “the basics.” He then attended Cornell University, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree. After college, he moved to New York and was mentored by artists Alan Saret and Chuck Close. Until he could earn his living completely through art making, he worked as a picture framer. In prints like *Sequence One* he often uses what he calls “visual algorithms” to determine the procedures that he uses in his artwork. His work is now in collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and other important museums nationally.

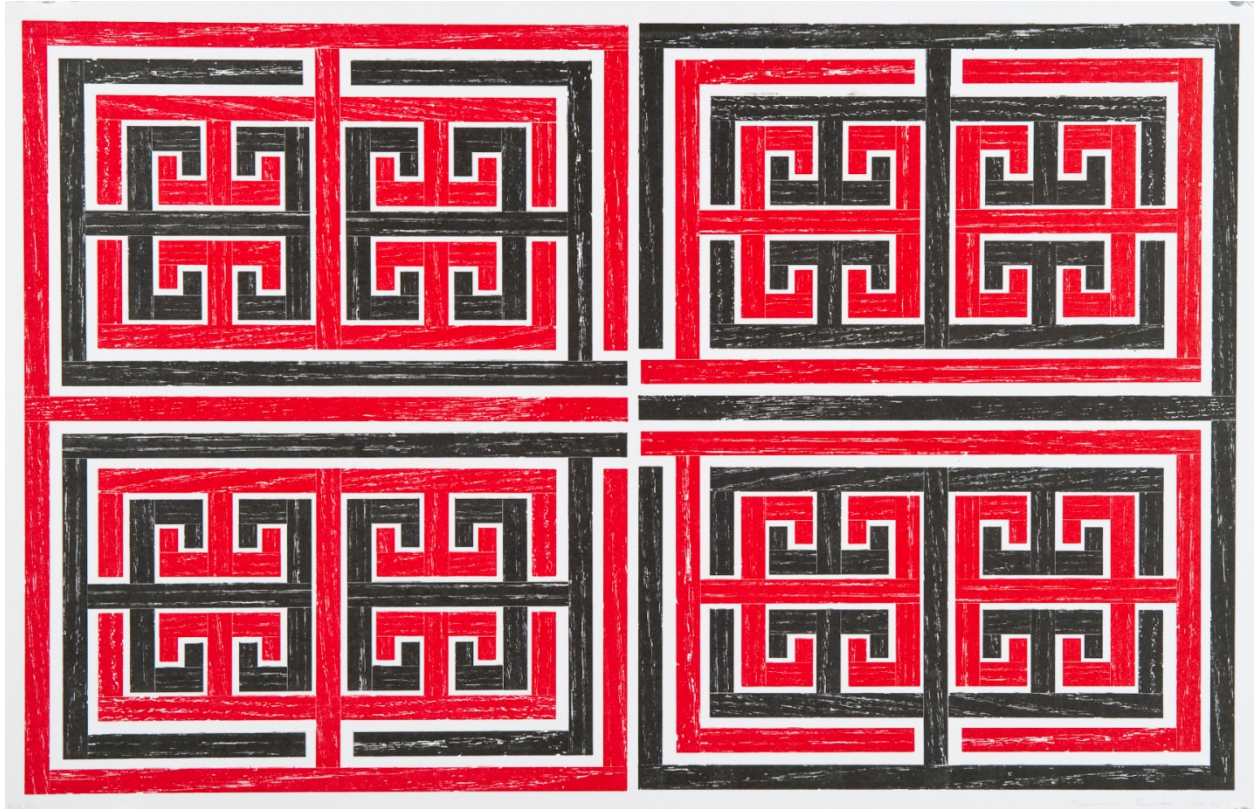


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James Siena, *Two Sequences, Two Variations*, 2010