

David Zlotky – Middle School Art and Computer



David Zlotky is too modest to tell you without prompting, but he has an oil painting in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum's permanent collection and a portrait of former U.S. Treasurer Georgia Neese Gray hanging in the Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. For him, art is a form of creative expression. It's also "a method of communication, an exercise in higher level thinking. And it's fun!"

Mr. Zlotky shares his enthusiasm for art with the 7th and 8th graders whose year-long body of work goes on display as part of the annual Middle School Art Show. Each project is based on a well-known artist's distinctive style; photographer Nick Brandt, for example, famous for computer manipulation of wildlife photos that gives them an almost a magical quality. "I give my students a lot of creative freedom," says Mr. Zlotky. "The curriculum is a place to start. They come up with ideas that are related, but different." Brandt's inspiration spawns student photos and drawings with his distinctive blurred edges and interplay between light and shadow.

Nearby are works inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe. Mr. Zlotky borrowed animal skulls and antlers from his science colleagues and encouraged students to emulate the famous artist's point of view. "Because of her macro view," explains Mr. Zlotky, "a bone becomes an abstract shape. The ordinary becomes extraordinary."

Then there's the Chagall-inspired section of the exhibit. "We looked at his works," says Mr. Zlotky, "talked about color composition, fantasy and their dream-like quality. Many of the students used their real dreams as the basis for their work. I really enjoy introducing the kids to various ideas about art and artists and getting their thoughts. I'm amazed by their creative abilities." Still, he doesn't base grades on artistic ability. "If they make an effort, they get a good grade," says Mr. Z.

Part of the effort is completing a weekly sketching assignment outside of class. They can be quick sketches of everyday subjects. "What's important to me is that they draw," says their artist teacher. "I want them to be in the habit of doing it, of using that facility in themselves."

Even though he has sold paintings, Mr. Zlotky characterizes the professional art world as weird. "We have talked about what makes some art valuable and some artists well-known," he says. "The value of art is what people will pay and in some regards, the value is about the context in which it's seen, a museum, for example. I enjoy discussing this kind of thing with the students, and I think they enjoy it, too."