

Look Now: Observing Boston Through Art and Science

Fall 2018

Wednesdays, 6:00 - 8:30 PM

Faculty: Isabel Beavers + Allison Gray

Course Description

Look Now: Observing Boston Through Art and Science is based on the practice of observation, one that underpins all of the visual arts, many other disciplines, and, when considered closely, allows us to perceive the world around us in new ways. The course is based on experience and observation in the world and we use Boston and its environs as our laboratory. Most weeks we undertake site-specific field work to make works based on observation of the landscape, cultural institutions in the area, and the Tufts campus itself. Students are encouraged to work in many mediums and learn new processes of investigating the world. The course includes readings, studio periods, guest lectures, and a mid-term and final assignment that use the process of observation to create original artworks that deal with contemporary issues related to the environment, architecture and landscape.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Understand a range of methodological approaches utilizing observation as artistic process
- Work with artistic tools for recording, archiving, and notating observation
- Consider the Boston locale in a new light through continued observation of its places and spaces
- Experience a course built for exploration of one's local region
- Investigate the ways observation is used in contemporary art
- Be exposed to a suite of artists who work with these themes and intersections, both in research and through field work
- Develop their own methods for integrating close observation into contemporary art practices

Course Requirements for Credit

- Be on time and prepared for class
- Participate in all critiques and discussions
- Complete all assignments
- Complete a final project to be developed based on your own interests that relate to the course, including a project proposal discussed with instructors and a final body of work

Tufts Attendance Policy

In accordance with Tufts policy, students are permitted two unexcused absences per semester. An absence will be excused when there are significant extenuating circumstances or sickness that cause the student to miss class. Absences are only considered excused if discussed with the instructor, in person or by email, at least 24 hours before the missed class and a letter of documentation must be provided to the instructor to account for the absence no later than one week past the date of the unexcused absence.

Class Policies

Respect and listen to other students during critiques and class discussions

No phone activities during class critiques or discussions
Bring your energy and attention! The more you bring to the class the better it will be.

Materials List

- Drawing pencils
- Watercolor kit
- Erasers
- 3-5 watercolor paintbrushes of varying sizes
- Jar for water
- Sketchbook
- Watercolor paper
- Magnifying glass and/ or microscope
- Drawing board
- String, posts, and other materials for observational plots
- Additional mediums and materials as needed for projects, etc.

Week 1: Observation - The Root of Artistic Process

A brief history of environmental art and art related to observation as context for today
Artists: James Audubon, James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, Maya Lin, Charles Lindsay, Byron Kim, and more

Discuss the role observation has played historically in art: drawing, portraiture, the Renaissance and development of perspectival drawing and painting.

Art as record of observation (J. M. W. Turner's paintings and air pollution, the Seine River water quality seen through painting)

Assignment:

What does observation mean to you? Develop a piece that utilizes a process of observation and records this observation. Think creatively about the ways observation can function and the artists discussed during class.

Readings:

“Art and the Ecological” Ben Davis <https://miamirail.org/summer-2015/art-and-the-ecological/>

Excerpt from *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger

Excerpt from *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Nancy Holt

Week 2: Experiments in the Field

Class visits Tufts campus location for creation of a class field experiment. Mimicking the process of observation plots, the class will map out a land sculpture together that creates plots to be observed periodically throughout the semester. We will return three times to this site and record observations through a variety of artistic processes including drawing, painting, photography, sound and bio-artistic methods.

Readings:

Excerpt from *A Sand County Almanac*

Excerpt from *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood*, Alexander Nemerov

Week 3: Seeing Natural History

We visit a local natural history collection. We discuss the role of observation in natural history and its influence on earth environmental artists and painters.

Activity: Mimic the process of observational field work through extended observation of a specimen. Record this object and use this record as inspiration for another piece or as a work in and of itself.

Assignment:

Introduce field notes assignment

Students bring a field notebook in which they keep weekly observations. Each student picks something that they can observe daily or weekly throughout the semester. This could include the color of the sky each day, their first meal each day, daily temperatures, the color of leaves of the trees changing. The field notebook acts as a record through which the student observes and records changes in their environment. This can be completed in any medium that suits the students' project idea. Students will present their field notes to the class during final critiques and should also be brought to each class session for an ongoing review.

Readings:

Excerpts from *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, E.O. Wilson

Excerpts from *The Art of American Still Life*, Mark DeSaussure Mitchell, Carol Troyen, Katie A. Pfohl, Bill Brown

“What Doctors Can Learn from Looking at Art” Dhruv Khullar, M.D.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/22/well/live/what-doctors-can-learn-from-looking-at-art.html>

Week 4: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

We visit the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston as a group to look at a history of still life painting in the MFA Collection. Here we discuss a survey of artworks from the Dutch still lifes to contemporary artworks.

This group visit supports our exploration of still life and ongoing discussion of the use of observation in art historical periods. We will also discuss how observation can activate other professional fields.

Assignment:

Collect and bring a mix of organic and synthetic materials to create still lifes next class.

Week 5: Contemporary Still Life

This week we will discuss contemporary applications of the still life and a dynamic, multi-step process of making still life work. We experiment with techniques, materials and processes for creating engaging still lifes that range from organic material that will decompose, to synthetic materials and banal objects in the home and studio. There will be in-class studio time dedicated to the creation of the still life setups.

Assignment:

Finish still life project by reinterpreting still life into another medium. This week students take the still life they have built and re-interpret it through painting, drawing, photography, animation, video or producing another evolution of the sculpture. This takes the practice of observation and turns original observations into an art-work abstracted from the original forms. Along the way students have imbued the still life and ultimately the final work with meaning and process.

Week 6: Mid-Term Critique

Critique of still life assignment

Introduce final project: Students design their own final project based on a practice of observation or other idea discussed in the course. Students are encouraged to turn to their field notes notebook for inspiration, or one of the sites visited by the class. The requirements for the final project include:

- A series of works based on processes of observation
- Students must fold content into the process of observation by choosing a specific object, environmental quality, site, or activity to observe
- Projects can utilize group observation plots as inspiration for final works but do not have to
- Project must take an original observation and push the process forward by re-interpreting this observation or set of observations into another form
- Students turn in project proposal to be approved by faculty before commencing final project.

Week 7: Revisit Field Experiment

We revisit our observation plots and make new observations.

Readings:

A Manual of Scientific Enquiry

Introduces topics of citizen science and observation's contributions to exploratory science.

"Putting Down Roots" Michael Pollan

Week 8: Boston Harbor Islands Field Visit - A New Perspective on the City

The group visits the Boston Harbor Islands to investigate recent artistic efforts in the National Park and to observe the city from a new vantage point. Additionally, there will be a focus on the unique biodiversity and ecosystems of the Islands.

Reading:

"Intersectionality as a Blueprint for Post-Colonial Scientific Community Building" Dr. Chandra Prescod Weinstein

Week 9: The Observatory

This week we visit the BU observatory and look through the telescopes. We will speak to astronomy department about use of the telescopes and practice of observation as used in astronomy and astrophysics. We use this time as an opportunity to discuss political activism in the Boston area and environmental issues and sea-level rise impacts in Massachusetts.

Assignment:

Final project proposals due next class

Week 10: Final Project Presentations

Student Presentations: Students present their final project ideas to the class. Each student spends 15 minutes presenting their ideas, observational methods and progress on the final project. They receive feedback from faculty and students that they can incorporate into the final weeks of their observational practice.

Reading:

“Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet” Margaret Atwood

Week 11: The Final Observation

This week is the final visit to our observation plots. The class will make final observations and take down observation plot structures.

Assignment:

Work on final project

Week 12: Individual Meetings and Work Time

Students meet with faculty to discuss progress on final projects.

Assignment:

Finish final project

Week 13: Critique of Final Projects