

James Lavadour: The Properties of Paint

February 2 – March 30, 2008

Hallie Ford Museum of Art

Willamette University

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *James Lavadour: Properties of Paint* and offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of James Lavadour.
- To explore the artist's process and how his interest in the "physical properties of paint" informs his technique and his body of work.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of the artist's style.
- Discuss how the artist creates images from the physical act of painting.
- Discuss the natural and physical forces involved in the creation of Lavadour's paintings, and their relationship to the physics of flow.
- Discuss the relationship between the physical properties of paint and the viewers' interaction with Lavadour's paintings.

Preparing for the tour:

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Using the image (print out a transparency for projection or one color copy for each student) and information in the teacher packet, create a pre-and/or post-tour lesson plan for the classroom to support and complement the gallery experience.
- Create a tour
 - Build on the goals and objectives from this packet, as well as concepts students have discussed in the classroom.
 - Have a specific focus, i.e. subject matter; technique; art elements; etc.
 - Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
 - Include a simple task to keep students focused.
 - Plan transitions and closure for the tour.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

At the Museum:

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Focus on the works of art. Emphasize looking and discovery through visual scanning (a guide is included in this packet). If you are unsure where to begin, a good way to start is by asking, “What is happening in this picture?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “What do you see that makes you say that?” or “Show us what you have found.”
- Balance telling about a work and letting students react to a work.
- Use open-ended question to guide student looking and to focus their thinking on certain topics and concepts.
- Slow down and give students a chance to process.
- Respect all responses and deal with them.
- Be aware of students’ interest spans (usually about 45 to 50 minutes) and comfort.

INDEX

BIOGRAPHY: James Lavadour.....	4
PROPERTIES OF PAINT: The Physicality of Perception.....	5
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES.....	7
COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS	9
VISUAL SCANNING	10
IMAGE: <i>Scaffold</i>.....	11

BIOGRAPHY: James Lavadour

(excerpted from the exhibition essay, *James Lavadour: The Properties of Paint*, by Rebecca Dobkins)

Born in 1951 in Pendleton, Oregon, James Lavadour grew up in a family “where everyone made or did something that could be called art.”¹ Lavadour's father, Joseph came from a family with many branches – French Canadian, Chinook, Walla Walla, and Assiniboine Sioux – and his mother, Colleen, is of German-Irish descent. Lavadour began seriously painting by the time he was twenty, and among his first works were abstract landscapes using food coloring and watercolor.² Much has been made of the fact that Lavadour is a self-taught painter, yet he was not isolated in a self-contained world. The land itself was Lavadour's teacher. Regular hikes through the hills on the Umatilla Indian Reservation provided rigorous training in the powers of observation and the processes of geologic time.³

In the 1970s Lavadour moved back to the reservation from Walla Walla, Washington, where he had finished high school and began to work for tribal government in education, social services and land-use management. During these years, he pursued his art and key figures in Pendleton and in the tribal community helped him connect with the broader art world. By the 1980s, he was showing widely, with work chosen for exhibitions at the University of Oregon's Museum of Art, the Portland Art Museum, Sacred Circle Gallery in Seattle, the Seattle Art Museum and the Heard Museum in Phoenix. Realizing that this success was made possible only through the support of others, Lavadour sought a way to assist other emerging artists on the Umatilla reservation and beyond. The concept for Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts was born. Founded by Lavadour and several collaborators in 1992, the institute's mission is to provide educational, social, and economic opportunities for Native Americans through artistic development.⁴ It offers workshops and classes in traditional and contemporary arts, and emphasizes the role art can play in communities as an economic and cultural resource.

¹ Quoted in W. Jackson Rushing, “What the Ground Says: The Art of James Lavadour,” in *Into the Fray: The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art*, 71.

² For reproductions of Lavadour's early work, see Vicki Halper, *James Lavadour: Landscapes* (Spokane, WA: Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, 2001), 14, 17.

³ Both Rushing and Halper make points similar to mine here. See Rushing 2005, 71; and Halper 2001, 15.

⁴ Wee www.crowshadow.org for more information.

THE PROPERTIES OF PAINT: The Physicality of Perception

(information adapted from the exhibition essay, *James Lavadour: The Properties of Paint*, by Rebecca Dobkins)

I see time, space, and event in the properties of paint. The properties of paint are infinite, and a painting is a model for infinity. The essence of painting is an organic event.⁵

I am interested most in paint when it is flowing in mass, and the particles of pigment are like rocks in a flood stream moving and fanning into sedimentary masses. Things happen, patterns appear, objects emerge. A painting is not created, it is revealed. To me, it means we are alive and we are connected in thought.

What a painting does is bring you out to the edge of perception, out in that place where there are processes happening that we're not usually aware of. Painting is a telescope pointing into world we cannot otherwise see. There is physicality to perception; there is humanity in the action of making a painting.

James Lavadour



Scaffold

2000

Oil on wood

9 panels, 20 x 30" each; 60 x 90" overall

Collection of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute,
Pendleton, Oregon

Image courtesy of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute

Photography by James Lavadour

The painter James Lavadour is known for kinetic landscape paintings that are evocative of the geological forces that shaped the earth of his homeland, the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. Working in tones of earth and fire, Lavadour uses processes of layering, scraping, and wiping that in macrocosm and over millennia also formed the hills and ridges the artist grew up walking, around the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

What becomes clear when Lavadour speaks is that he understands painting not merely similar to forces that shape the earth, but a physical force governed by the same natural laws. His paintings themselves are natural and physical forces, in which the properties of paint are revealed – the visceral physicality of liquid and mineral, its interaction with gravity.

⁵ All quotations in this essay are from conversations between Rebecca Dobkins and James Lavadour and statements written by Lavadour in 2007.

In 1995, during the second of two residencies at Rutgers University Center for Innovative Print and Paper, Lavadour engaged in a wide-ranging conversation with a physicist who remarked that the drips and gestures of Lavadour's work could be understood in terms associated with the physics of flow – phrases such as “cosmic vortex,” “turbulence,” and “fingering instability” (what happens when liquid behaves unexpectedly).⁶ With this new understanding, Lavadour began to experiment even more openly with the physical processes of paint and painting, and with perceptual discovery. These explorations inform paintings such as *Scaffold*, which brings together two strands of his work – his landscapes and what he variously calls “interiors” or architectural “structures” or “abstractions.”

I use two elemental structures, a landscape and an architectural abstraction (a vortex and a grid). There's the flow of landscape and then the intersection of the architectural structure, which is just like being in a room looking out a window, with floors, angles, walls, doors, ceilings, pathways. A painting is a complex event with many things going on at multiple levels. Close, far, color, layers, scrapes, and drips all swirled around by memories. I keep it all organized with structure. Structure is the bed to the river.

James Lavadour

Scaffold combines expressionistic landscapes with overlays of red and white structural elements. The flow of the landscape, which emerges from the processes of layering, scraping and wiping, intersects (or “compounds,” to use Lavadour's term) with the architectural abstractions. These structures are formed in part through manipulating the physical properties of flow by allowing the still-wet paint to drip and then inverting or turning the painting so that the drips appear to flow upward or sideways. The patterns that appear, the objects that emerge to the viewer's eye evoke nature not as seen on a mere surface level but as a dynamic process, as an agent of upheaval, waves, and flows. These processes suggest that what we see on the surface is a result of the turbulence underlying the physical properties of the landscape – and of paint itself.

Resource:

Dobkins, Rebecca and James Lavadour, *James Lavadour: the Properties of Paint*.
Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University, Salem OR, 2008

⁶ In a 2005 interview with artist Eva Lake, Lavadour discusses his experience at Rutgers. See www.lovelake.org/event_of_painting_James_Lavadour.htm

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

In the Classroom

- Visit Oregon Public Broadcasting’s website, *Art Beat at School* to learn more about James Lavadour's painting processes. Included is a video clip (6:28 minutes) of the artist discussing his landscapes, and a lesson plan for the art activity (Activity 3), *Circumstances in Paint*, which explores Lavadour's technique and how his images are “revealed” through the act of painting and the physical processes of paint. Students will manipulate paint, observe what shapes and forms the paint takes, then work out their own landscapes. For grade levels 9-11, 6-8, 4-5. Video can be downloaded or streamed.

www.opb.org/education/atschool/lesson

- Experiment with the art of fluid flow. In his 2005 interview with the artist Eva Lake, James Lavadour discussed the physics of flow as it relates to his own work:

[T]he whole concept behind flow struck me. It wasn’t some psychological and philosophical thing. It was an actual physical process that happens – that substance moves forward and it encounters an object and it spreads apart and creates vortexes and the vortexes break down into turbulence...I found that extremely exciting. I began to look at my painting in a different way, at the continual flow of energy of moving, scraping, putting paint on, taking it off and continuing on.

www.lovelake.org/event_of_painting_James_Lavadour.htm

Visit The University of Colorado’s website *Flow Visualization: A Course in the Physics and Art of Fluid Flow*. The site features a range of techniques for creating images of fluid flows, including two modules developed for middle schools.

www.colorado.edu/MCEN/flowvis/

At The Museum

- Discuss the following statements made by the artist:

A painting... it's really not a picture of something. It is something and we interact with it and we walk away with an experience. We bring our lives to this painting. (from the ArtBeat segment above)

I am interested most in paint when it is flowing in mass, and the particles of pigment are like rocks in a flood stream moving and fanning into sedimentary masses. Things happen, patterns appear, objects emerge. A painting is not created, it is revealed. To me, it means we are alive and we are connected in thought.

We have in our minds, I think, a whole library of shapes and forms and the way we make sense of the world when we look at it. There's something about it that we recognize, intimately. (From the ArtBeat segment above)

- Explore the concept that Lavadour's paintings exist between the physicality of the paint and the individual and collective perceptions (and memories) of the viewers.

Have students:

- Each choose a painting in the exhibition to study in depth.
- Observing from up close, write down one or two word descriptions of the paint and the various ways Lavadour uses it.
- Observing from a greater distance, write a brief paragraph describing what they would experience if they were physically traveling through the landscape – the sights, sounds, smells, even the way their bodies feel as they move.
- Compare and contrast their own descriptions of the paint with the description of their experience “inside” the landscape. How are they similar? How are they different? Does one inform the other?
- Compare with each other the descriptions of their experiences. What experiences are individual? What experiences are shared? Discuss in relationship to the above artist statements.

COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS

The suggested discussions and activities included in this packet can be used to support the following Common Curriculum Goals developed by the Oregon Department of Education. For specific benchmarks for your grade level check with your school district or the Oregon Public Education Network (O.P.E.N.)

www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53

The Arts

Aesthetics and Criticism

- Use knowledge of technical, organizational and aesthetic elements to describe and analyze one's own art and the art of others.
- Respond to works of art, giving reasons for preferences.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

- Explain how a work of art reflects the artist's personal experience in a society or culture.

Create, Present and Perform

- Apply artistic elements and technical skills to create, present and/or perform works of art for a variety of audiences and purposes.
- Communicate verbally and in writing, using knowledge of the arts to describe and/or evaluate one's own work
- Express ideas, moods and feelings through various art forms.

Language Arts

Writing

- Use a variety of modes (e.g., narrative, imaginative, expository, persuasive) in appropriate context.

Communication

- Communicate supported ideas using oral, visual, written, and multi-media forms in ways appropriate to topic, context, audience and purpose.

Science

Physical Science

- Understand fundamental forces, their forms, and their effects on motion.

VISUAL SCANNING

Scanning is meant to guide the viewer in looking at a work of art. To avoid tedium, one may choose not to use all six points during each scanning.

1. SUBJECT

Subject is usually a good starting place, but should one of the other points “speak” to the viewer first, by all means, begin there.

What is the subject of the work?

What objects can be identified or recognized?

If there is no imagery, the formal qualities may be the subject (line, shape, color, etc.)

2. COMPOSITION

Identify the formal qualities (line, color, shape, form, etc.)

How are these formal qualities organized?

repetition

contrast

balance

movement

scale

unity

visual rhythm

3. TECHNIQUE & MEDIUM

How was the work made? (painting, sculpture, prints, architecture, installation, etc.)

Does the particular technique contribute to the total? How?

4. EXPRESSION

What is the role of cultural conventions? (Egyptian, for example)

What is the mood or emotional content?

What is the message or meaning?

What has the artist done to “send” the message?

5. CONTEXT (STYLES)

How is the work a product of a particular culture?

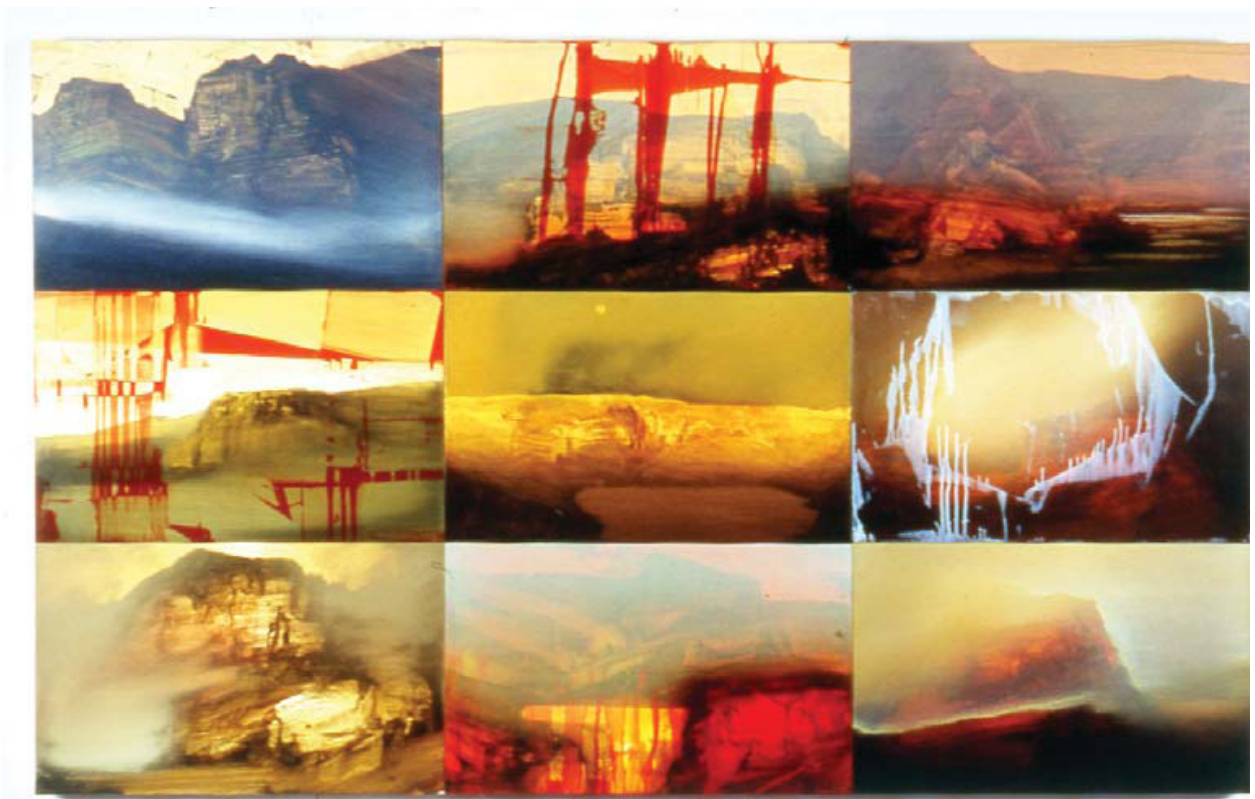
Where and how does the work fit into history?

6. CRITIQUE

Has the artist succeeded in expressing thoughts, emotions, and ideas? How?

Viewer’s response: like or dislike. Why?

How can a work that one dislikes still be a valid statement of the artist?



Scaffold

2000

Oil on wood

9 panels, 20 x 30" each; 60 x 90" overall

Collection of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute, Pendleton, Oregon

Image courtesy of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute

Photography by James Lavadour