WALTER PIEHL, JR.
breezy music: sweetheart of the rodeo
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Walter Piehl, Jr., 1991
Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 36"  
Plains Art Museum Permanent Collection

“Any occurrence of explosive energy is usually not well represented by precise edges and color contained within outlines. Much of rodeo is about energy, chaos, and powerful, dynamic, uncontrolled movement.”

~ Walter Piehl, Jr.

MAKING CONNECTIONS
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EXPRESSIVE LINE-UP

The art movement, Abstract Expressionism, has greatly influenced Piehl. He is particularly interested in the work of Willem de Kooning, whose paintings blend recognizable images with abstract feelings that give his canvases a rich surface texture and vibrant energy (see Rosen, J. 1950-52). Piehl captures the essence of rodeo action with scribbles and gesturers that ignore detail. Notice, for example, how the cowboy’s arms, which are clearly outlined, are not actually painted or drawn, but merely indicated. Then trace along the lines and you see the almost perfect contour of a horse, a horse’s coat, legs with boots, and hooves.

Art Connection

Make a drawing of something in movement. Choose a subject that is moving fast and with a lot of energy, such as your pet or play a sports match. Keeping your pencil on the paper and your eyes on the action, make lines and marks that match the movement you see. What kind of lines did you use? Now choose another subject that has a smooth and graceful movement; for instance a sail boat gliding, a ballet dancer’s form, or a kite soaring. Describe the lines you used for this second drawing. Compare and contrast the lines you used for the fast and energetic drawing and the smooth and graceful drawing.

LOOKING BACK TO THE FUTURE

The Futurists of Italy also influenced Piehl’s artwork. Futurism was a dynamic art movement of the early 20th century. The Futurists were concerned in capturing the essence of movement in time and space. To achieve this, they looked to a new technology—cinematography—which portrays movement by presenting several still images in rapid succession. The human eye fills in the “gaps” between pictures, much like the blurred areas between the big movements in Giacomo Balla’s Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash 1912.

Art Connection

Holding a pencil between your thumb and forefinger, move it rapidly back and forth. What do you see and how does it compare to the details on the right? Piehl uses this same technique of repeating forms to animate the horse and rider. Try drawing a picture that depicts movement using this technique.

SEEING RED AND FEELING BLUE

The artist who formed the German art movement, Der Blaue Reiter, used color to express feelings and ideas. One of these artists, Wassily Kandinsky, measured the psychological properties of color, noting that color calls forth a “vibration from the soul.” Piehl uses color not only to establish form, but to express emotion and movement. His vibrant colors define the horse and rider and help to set them in motion.

Art Connection

Color two paragraphs. In your mind, which color is cool, calm, and collected? Which color has a hot temper? Which is sad? Happy? Quiet and shy? What are your favorite colors and why?

Create a “personality picture” using images and shades of a color that express a particular personality or emotion (for example sad images in shades of blue).

COMPOSING A COMPOSITION

Piehl used the Kandinsky composition to portray the horse and rider in an airborne leap. Note how the lines of action burst through the top edges of the picture frame, creating the appearance that the horse and rider are exploding off the page.

Art Connection

On three sheets of paper, use colored markers, crayons, oil pastels, or paint to create a composition that expresses the feeling of:
1. soaring through the sky with wings
2. dancing to loud music with a heavy beat
3. sleeping under a tree

How did the compositions of each differ from one another? Why?

COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES

Walter Piehl, Jr. enjoys “coloring outside the lines,” painting at times with the uninhibited energy of a child. Picasso said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” Piehl appears to have solved that problem. He expresses himself with child-like abandon, tempered by the skill and insight he has acquired as a professional artist.

VISUAL ART PRODUCTION

Think of something you love to do. It could be hiking, swimming, playing ball, dancing ballet, or anything that involves movement and emotion. Work large as your whole body is part of the creative process. Use crayons, oil pastels, or a paintbrush to create lines, colors, and a composition that best express how you feel when you are doing what you love.

Write an artist statement that best describes the lines, colors, and composition you used to create your work, and how these elements relate to your subject. Organize an exhibition of your classroom’s artwork to show in your school and/or a location in your community. Include your artist statement as part of the exhibition.

VOCABULARY

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

A movement of non-representational painting that began in New York City during the 1940s and attained international importance. Believing in freedom of expression, the Abstract Expressionists often dripped, threw, or poured paint onto large canvases in an effort to show feelings and emotions.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

The art or technique of motion photography, involving movement by projection in rapid fashion of still pictures.

COMPOSITION

In abstract painting, the organization of shapes, lines, and colors within a work of art.

DER BLAUE REITER (THE BLUE RIDER)

A German expressionist art movement, lasting from 1911 to 1914, that sought to discover spiritual truths through art. Their paintings merged human, plant, and animal abstractions to romantic imagery of horses, their special symbol for man’s relationship with nature (see Kandinsky’s Lyric (Man on a Horse), 1911).

FUTURISM

An early 20th-century art movement that centered in Italy and emphasized the dynamism, speed, energy, and power of the machine and the vitality and restlessness of modern life.