

Kaleidoscopic Corals

by Arita Wong



Inspired by the vibrant, atmospheric undersea paintings of Yellena James, this project will use a monoprint technique of applying dabs of paint between two plastic transparencies, enough to make two prints. Students will then use mixed media to add lines and texture, shells and sea grasses, to turn blobs of paint into a colorful, kaleidoscopic coral bouquet. Coral reefs are not only beautiful, but they also provide vital support to over 25% of marine life. Climate change and ocean warming have resulted in mass bleaching events, leaving coral reefs critically endangered.

Student Objectives

- Learn about coral reefs
- Learn about artist, Yellena James
- Learn about monoprint technique
- Learn about mixed media

Coral Reefs

Coral reefs are known as "rainforests of the sea," biodiversity hotspots that support all sorts of sea life including sponges, clams, sea stars, crustaceans, sea turtles and over 4000 species of fish. Coral reefs offer shelter and protection, space for nurseries, feeding ecosystems, and even cleaning stations, a hub for symbiotic partnerships.

In the animated film, Finding Nemo, the clownfish & anemones are a classic example of mutualism, a type of symbiosis where both species benefit: the fish gets protection from predators within the stinging tentacles (to which it is immune), and the anemone gets nutrients from the fish through its waste.

Corals have a symbiotic relationship with algae that live in their tissues. Algae gets protection and nutrients for photosynthesis. Coral gets 90% of their food from algae's photosynthesis. It's a "win-win" relationship. Algae are crucial for reef building, and the vibrant colors of corals come from pigments within the algae.

Coral reefs are experiencing rapid, widespread decline due to climate-driven marine heatwaves. Elevated temperatures cause the algae to produce toxins, prompting the coral to expel them, leaving coral bleached white, and vulnerable. And as heatwaves occur more frequently, it can be harder for corals to recover.



Yellena James, artist

Yellena James is a mixed media artist known for her vibrant and atmospheric paintings of marine flora. She combines abstract forms, organic shapes to create colorful arrangements that dazzle and radiate emotion.



One New York Plaza Mural, 2022
HALCYON

"For my show, Weightless, I'm working in an array of different mediums and substrates, including acrylic paints, gouaches, and inks, on canvas, clayboard, and primed wood panels. Each piece is done intuitively without planning or sketching. And there is a moment that arises while making each piece, when I can see the final steps clearly and the artwork begins to reveal itself. In those moments, every hint of pressure dissipates. It lifts, all of it. And I am weightless."



Monoprint Technique

Monoprint is a form of printmaking that produces a unique, one-of-a-kind image. For this project, we will squeeze small blobs of acrylic paint (5 colors) onto a non-porous sheet of plastic transparency, then place another transparency on top, then gently press until the blobs of paint spread out. After peeling the transparencies apart, you will be able to make two prints by placing your paper on top and pressing, to transfer the paint to paper. Peel your paper away carefully to reveal your print! This abstract print will be a starting point for your coral bouquet.



Mixed Media

Allow your print to dry; a thin, smashed layer of acrylic paint should dry within a few minutes. While it is drying, look at your abstract print, the shapes, the colors, and the negative space. What areas would you like to add some foliage? Definition? Lines? Organic shapes? Test out the mixed media like colored pencils, graphite pencil, and white paint pen. (You can include oil pastels, crayons and chalks if you have them.) Your piece will look more cohesive if you use existing colors and use them to balance out the color in your piece.



Art Vocabulary

- **Monoprint:** printmaking process that produces one unique print
- **Negative space:** the empty space around visual elements
- **Warm colors:** reds, oranges, yellows
- **Cool colors:** blues, greens, purples
- **Abstract art:** a style of art that does not attempt to represent visual reality. Instead it uses shapes, colors, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

SET-UP AND PROCEDURE

Docent Set-up

- Acrylic paint (6-7 colors) in squeeze bottles, per table or station
- Sample color palette includes deep, bright and pastels:
 - Cool colors: blue, pastel aqua, spring green
 - Warm colors: red, bright orange, yellow, pastel peach
- Cover tables. Put label on back of cardstock.
- Wet wipes to clean hands and transparencies for re-use.
- Do not wash acrylic paint water down school drains.
- Optional: blow dryer to speed dry time
- Optional: plastic gloves for cleanup
- Optional mixed media: oil pastels, chalk pastels are messier

Supplies Per Student

- Newspaper "placemat"
- Paper towel
- Scratch paper (test mixed media etc)
- Two plastic transparencies (letter size)
- Two sheets of card stock (letter size)
- Mixed media: graphite pencil, colored pencils that coordinate w/ color palette
- White paint pen (or thick white acrylic paint and old pens/pencils for dots)

Procedure

1. Put one plastic transparency on newspaper "placemat."
2. Choose warm color paint. Squeeze 3-5 nickel-sized blobs of paint in different places on transparency, avoiding edges and leaving space between blobs.
3. Repeat the process for 3-5 more colors. Be sure to leave some white space.
4. When you are done adding paint, place the second transparency directly on top of first one. Watch how the paint moves as you slowly and gently press it flat.
5. Carefully peel apart the two transparencies and lay them paint-side up.
6. Lay card stock directly on top of one, gently but firmly pressing it all over.
7. Carefully peel away the card stock to reveal your first print!
8. Lay it face up on the table and allow it to dry for a few minutes.
9. Repeat steps 6-8 for the second print.
10. Note, use wet wipes to clean transparencies as soon as possible.
11. While your prints are drying, look at the abstract shapes on your paper.
Are there empty spaces that need to be filled? with shapes? color?
12. Look at the sample sheet of shapes, textures and sea grasses you can add to fill out your coral bouquet. Test your colors and ideas on the scratch paper.
 - a. Balance a red blob with a red colored pencil shape in empty areas.
 - b. A graphite pencil can be used to add shadow between shapes.
 - c. If paint is dry, draw textures and patterns on top.
 - d. If paint is still wet, use a pencil to scrape textures and patterns.
13. Lastly, use a white paint pen to add some highlights, like white dots.

Presenting Artist: Arita Wong

Arita became a Young at Art docent in 2010 when her daughter started Kindergarten, and she loved having the opportunity to learn, create and teach, all while getting in touch with her own inner artist child! Arita also served on the Design Committee and as Historian for several years, and continues to teach art locally. She works primarily with paper, and has a passion for watercolor, and creating illustrated travel and story maps.

Contact info: aritawong@gmail.com