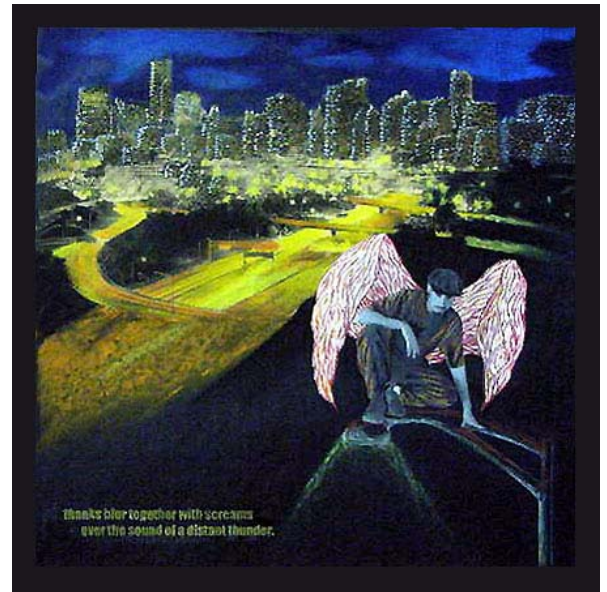




# BIG QUESTIONS

*The Big Questions project was developed by Olivia Gude, Lourdes Guerrero, and Ryin Horne in the Portrait of a Young Artist group of the 2001 Spiral Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago.*



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**W**hat do comic book heroes and artists have in common? Seemingly, central to the existence of each is the time to ponder the important questions of life. Gaughin’s famous painting sums up common queries of artists (and superheroes): *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

Many art teachers believe that serious thought and inquiry into why we are here and why we do what we do should be part of the artwork in the classroom. A few, intense students introduce these questions, but most other students tend to shy away from the big, existential ideas. One of the reasons for this is that many teens feel shy about revealing too much of their inner lives in the school environment.

The Big Questions project encourages students to personally engage large questions of meaning, possibility, agency, and choice by giving them “deniability.” “I’m not really asking these questions; my superhero character is and everyone knows that superheroes from Spiderman to today’s Dark Angel talk about stuff like this.”

The Big Questions project is based on the unlikely combination of two artistic inspirations—Monet and Marvel. Students begin the project by using oil pastels on xeroxed images of their home city to explore creating dramatic light effects in the manner of Monet. Then working with specially posed digital photographs of themselves, the students use colored pencils to alter the images into their alter ego hero characters. In the final stage of the project, the students insert their self-portrait figures and their metaphysical speculations into their city scene.



## **PREPARATION**

To begin this project, you will need a number of photographs of city scenes. The project is more personal for the students if the scenes depict nearby places. For the Chicago project, we deliberately worked with imagery from tourist postcards because we wanted iconographic views of the city.

Xerox city scenes onto 11" x 17" colored sulphite construction paper. This can be done with a regular xerox machine, though you may have to handfeed the papers into the machine. Be sure to cut the pages very accurately as this can effect how well the paper goes through the machine.

Don't use white paper, as that would make it difficult to develop atmospheric color without obliterating the original picture. The idea is to let the xeroxed black tone represent the deepest shadows and to have the paper form a mid-tone, then the added oil pastels will quickly begin to give a sense of light to the scene.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In order to get the students excited about the project briefly explain the overall concept and show a sample or two. Then put away the samples and begin the step-by-step development of the project.

## **SEEING COLORED LIGHT**

Discuss times when the students have seen their home town or city bathed in unusual colored light. Discuss how this transforms the city. Discuss how the emotional climate of a movie or novel is often set by the look or description of the atmosphere.

Show artwork by Monet. It is particularly useful to show students examples of serial paintings such as the *Rouen Cathedral Façade* or *Houses of Parliament* in which the same scene is shown in different lights. Show students paintings by Joseph Turner to encourage them to think about color variation in the skies.

This is a good time to reinforce color vocabulary concepts such as hue, value, and, particularly, chroma or intensity. Pointing out the alternation of warm and cool in highlights and shadows helps students to think about color choices for their own artworks.

## **COLOR ON THE CITY**

Tape the selection of xeroxed city scenes onto a wall. Let students choose the scene on which they will base their project. An educational aspect for the students of this phase of the project is to see how in the completed works the same scene feels very different when developed in different colors.

Ask each student to choose a direction from which the light in his or her picture will radiate and to begin creating an atmospheric colored scene with oil pastels. Sometimes scraping color off the xerox can create interesting effects.

Students can also blend the oil pastels with a bit of mineral spirits on a cotton swab. Students love to do this and, unfortunately, then often overwork and overmute the marks in the picture. When this happens, have them re-establish a sense of texture by re-working the surface with more oil pastel.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Introduce the next step—designing a superhero character. Print out onto overhead transparencies pictures of “superheroes in thought” from the Marvel and DC websites.

Show these pictures to students and discuss the attributes of the superheroes and superheroines. How was the superhero created? What are his or her powers? How did the hero's past affect his or her psychological make up and outlook on life? Describe distinctive features. How is the character costumed? Is the character based on a mythological character or story? What kinds of questions does the hero worry about? What does the hero stand for?



Give each student a superhero planning worksheet to fill out to aid in designing his or her character. (At the end of the Big Questions Process Chapter there is a Superhero Character Development Worksheet pdf file for printing.)

## **DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF MEDITATIVE POSES**

Briefly, discuss artistic traditions of meditative poses such as Rodin's *The Thinker*.

Sketch on the board examples of how a figure could be integrated into the atmospheric city scenes. Students may wish to make a few thumbnails to aid in their planning.

Teach students the basics of using a digital camera. Form students into small groups and then send them into the hallway or an adjacent room to pose and photograph each other. It's a good idea to have props such as ladders, scaffold, spotlights, and capes available.

The downloading and printing of images can be done after class by the teacher or by individual students, depending on the students' skill levels and the availability of equipment. Print out digital photographs in B/W in a scale that works well with the city scenes. (Each will usually fit on an 8 1/2" x 11" paper.)

## **CHARACTER DESIGN**

Use colored pencils and collage to alter and develop the printouts into the superhero characters. (Some students may wish to do some preliminary work on their characters in Photoshop.)

## **BIG QUESTIONS**

Discuss the concept of the human search for meaning and purpose. You may wish to introduce basic concepts of existentialist thought. (See Big Questions Context Chapter on the Spiral Art Education website.)

A useful book for introducing students to the existentialism is *Sartre for Beginners*. Pages 21 through 28, a clear and humorous synopsis of the free choice at the heart of human existence, would make a good handout to stimulate discussion.

Have students answer the questions on the Big Questions: Endless Reflections Worksheet. (Download at the end of the Big Questions Process Chapter on the UIC Spiral Art Education Website.)

Ask each student to write a monologue for his or her character that alludes to the character's dreads, hopes, and observations about self and human nature.

## **ASSEMBLE THE ARTWORK**

Carefully cut out superhero characters and collage them into the city scenes. Students may want to add paper to the edges of a city scene—creating a nearby building or a room interior from which the scene is viewed. (See Sample Chapter.)

Add the monologue text to the scene. Text can be added at the bottom or in a side panel. It also works well to type up the text and print it out on acetate. The acetate can be cut to an interesting shape (such as a thought balloon or window pane) and attached to the artwork with a couple of tiny dabs of transparent glue. Since the artworks are often dark, it also works well to letter the text onto the acetate with a fine-point silver paint marker.

At the end of the Big Questions Process Chapter on the UIC Spiral Art Education Website ([spiral.aa.uic.edu](http://spiral.aa.uic.edu)), there is a pdf file for printing that has wonderful examples of student artwork created from this project.



## **MATERIALS & EQUIPMENT**

### **For Big Questions project**

photographs of city scenes

colored sulphite construction paper

oil pastels

mineral spirits

cotton swabs

colored pencils

small pieces of clear acetate

acrylic medium for use as glue

fine-point silver paint marker (optional)

pens

scissors or x-acto knives

pencils

rulers

digital camera

computer and printer

xerox machine

overhead projector