

Finding Inspiration in the Urban World

Windows

Window elements – Glass, panes, tinted, stained, reflective, frosted

Window concepts – Looking in, looking out, open, closed, broken, window shopping, different ways of opening

Window things – Windowsills, window boxes, shutters, blinds, shades, curtains, screens, awnings, displays, signs

Types of actual windows – Double-hung, casement, sliding, top-hinged, room windows, storm windows, screen windows, storefront windows, car, train, bus windows, picture windows, bay windows, oven windows, dryer windows, stained-glass windows

Window coverings

Real window coverings include curtains made of fabric, blinds in vinyl, shutters in wood, and awnings in metal.

Inventive window coverings could include anything strung and hanging like beaded curtains, one giant pompom over each window, blinds of pencils woven with twine, shutters of coconut shell, curtains designed like items of clothing or giant pot holders, or a transparent plastic awning, which would let in the sun, but keep out the rain.

Design and/or create a set of window coverings for a room. Use elements of the view outside, or reflect the theme or use of the room. You can also add meaning to your window coverings, besides paying attention to the materials and visual aesthetics.

Panes and frames

Do a painting on glass. Find an old window (thrift stores, flea markets, salvage yards). Treat the window frame as the painting frame and finish it any way you like. Paint on the windowpanes. You can play with the idea of it being a window and paint the view outside or the scene inside. You can also ignore the fact that it is a window, and simply consider it an interesting painting surface. With multiple panes you can do unrelated little paintings, a series of related pictures, a continuing story (like in the comics), or one large painting over the whole window.

Do a weaving or a mixed-media piece in an open window frame where all of the glass has been removed. Use the window frame as the supporting structure for your art. Again, you can work with the idea of it having once been an actual window, or you can simply create your piece using the material and aesthetics of the frame.

Faux stained-glass

Create a stained-glass window in any other medium besides glass. A few possible ideas:

- Glass beads strung on wire and supported by a frame. Use black or metallic beads as the solder.
- A mixed-media piece also supported by a frame. Use black or metallic yarn or wire for the solder.
- A faux stained-glass quilt using black or metallic thread or binding tape for the solder.
- Any two-dimensional work on paper, canvas or panel would make a fine, albeit opaque, faux stained-glass window. For transparency, use acetate sheets as your surface.

Window display

Create a window display for an actual or imagined business or store. This can be a painting, drawing, print, arranged photograph, diorama or

installation piece (or even a sculpture or a knitted piece). A collage might be the perfect thing for this. Think about the signage, lettering and placement of the objects in the window as a whole composition. Include the following things in your window display; the name of the business, a sign with the hours, a minimum of five objects related to the business, two predominant colors, one accent color, at least one figure of some kind (it doesn't have to be human), and a small set of anything hanging from the ceiling.

Create a window display for a made-up holiday or sale at a store. Choose a type of store and a holiday. A few examples would be:

- A sock store on Squirrel Eve
- A robot store and International Snow Holiday
- A store that sells wood pieces and scraps celebrating Cups o' Nothing Week

Remember that you must entice window shoppers to come on in and do their holiday shopping in this particular store. Decide on a few of your own random guidelines first and then go from there.

Window box

Create a window box, the container itself. What else can it be other than a plain wooden or plastic box? Could it also be a series of smaller boxes or buckets? How would they be held together or attached to each other? How would the box or containers be mounted outside a window? Think about embellishments for the window box, for aesthetic purposes and/or for suggesting a meaning.

Fill the window box, but not with the usual flowers or plants. Think of the window box as a sort of diorama or mini-installation with sculptural possibilities. Some ideas are:

- Imply a garden without using plants, real or fake.
- Make a window-aquarium, but without using water or living things.
- Fill it with abstracted fake flowers that you make from any material. Plant them in anything but soil.

- Create an absurd farm scene; a comedy of plastic cows, rows of tiny fake crops and alien spaceships.

Faces

Do a portrait, or a series of portraits, of faces pressed up against various windowpanes. The face, or faces, may either be looking in or looking out. Pay attention to the flattening of facial features and the fog of warm breath on the glass. Think about what the person or persons may be feeling when looking through the window. Looking in a window typically signifies curiosity, being left out and voyeurism. Looking out often means loneliness, longing, and dreaming of the view; a desire to leave.

Do a portrait, or a series of portraits, of faces in the reflection of the glass. Pay attention to the reflective qualities of the scene, transparencies, and implied meanings made by the layers of what can be seen in a reflection.

Kitties sitting in the window are a common scene. What else could there be perched on a windowsill looking out? How amusing, strange, scary and/or beautiful is it? Is it pressed up against the glass and slightly flattened?

Windows looking out free-write example:

Stare and stare through the window's glare searching for distant horizons, way over there. A glance on the chance for the weather in a dance, is it snowing, is it glowing, is it raining, are there stains out on the street, isn't it sweet, gonna dream of leaving going out in only daydreams. A pin for the pondering, no sin in thinking yonder, pacing windowsills with fingers set on sliding down hand rails. This is restless, this is pining, this is being pinned...

What images can you see from this free-writing sample?

Do your own brainstorming, free-writing and/or word association on the subject of looking out the window. Think of one of the following things to begin your writing session; the outside world, the view, the sense of distance, eyes being the windows of the soul, what you see when you look out a window.

What images have you come up with from your own writing?

Depict what you are seeing from any of your word images or mine.

Create anything that you want in any medium, in any format, and without restrictions, unless you would like to set some of your own guidelines before you start.

More window inspiration

Here are some other ideas that you can use as a basis for artistic creativity. You may also combine anything from below with another exercise in any chapter to make something original.

- The breeze. Open the window to let in a breeze. What comes in on the breeze? The idea of the cross-breeze.
- Windows in disrepair. Broken, patched, boarded up, gone completely.
- As seen from a distance, the patterns and rows of windows on a building, or maybe a stack of windows at the home repair store.
- Invent a window. New ways of opening and closing, or maybe you could create a revolving window. Picture the use of the window, invent one on paper and build a model.

Traffic Lights

Traffic light elements – Green, yellow, red, flashing, circles, arrows, blinking, metal, pole, wire, glass

Traffic light concepts – Changing meaning; go, go that way, stop, wait, caution, urban traffic, a one traffic light town

Traffic light situations – On a pole, hanging from a wire, one-sided, four-sided, bulb out, glass broken

Abstraction

Create an abstracted piece using only the following elements: The colors green, red, yellow, white and black. You may also use metallic paints in these colors or other metallic materials (depending on your medium). Use the shapes of disks, circles, rectangles and arrows, with these shapes covering at least 75% of your composition. A maximum of 25% of the piece may either be a solid field or a soft, vague, blurred, just-barely-hinted-at background scene. This can be expressed in any medium or form. It could even be a beaded sculpture with wires or knotted in yarn with buttons and feathers.

Scenery

Illustrate one or more of the following settings. Portray the mood of the scene, and not just how it looks on the surface. You may include some abstract elements, or you may go for pure representationalism.

- That solo middle-of-the-night-on-a-deserted-street flashing yellow light
- Rush hour in the busy downtown of a big city
- A lazy summer afternoon in a one traffic light town
- Any other scene where the traffic light is the main character

Meaning

Design a new system of traffic signage based on the questions in the point below. Include one of these new traffic lights in a scene. Set a particular mood, depending on the meaning of the new traffic signal.

- What would traffic lights of other colors such as blue or orange mean?
- What new symbols could traffic lights use besides hand, man walking, or arrow?
- What different words could there be for pedestrian signals besides walk, wait or stop?

Invention

Design and/or create a new traffic light for any of the following purposes:

- An intergalactic traffic light
- For the middle of nowhere here on earth
- For the only bathroom in a crowded household
- For a busy kitchen at a popular restaurant
- For dogs at a dog park
- For a public swimming pool or ice rink
- At a department store during the holiday season.
- For the dance floor

Subway

Subway elements – Color, letter, number-coded systems and maps, trains, trolleys, tracks, wires, third rail, tunnels, turnstiles, stairs, escalators, signs, metal, plastic, tile, wood, concrete

Subway concepts – Moving people, ride, commute, go, underground world, busy city

Subway things – Sound, smell, noise, speed, rush, schedules, tokens, passes

In London, as in some other places, the subway means an underground walkway, often beneath a busy intersection in a city. Here I am using the New York City definition, since this is where I was born, with subway meaning trains on tracks running below the ground. In London this is called the Underground. In other places it is referred to as the Metro, or maybe by its particular name such as the T in Boston. They are very big on abbreviating names in Boston, and T is about as short as it gets.

Maps and signage

Design a signage system for an imaginary subway; for entrances and exits at stations, a coding system for the different train lines, printed schedules for each line (or a master schedule), and tickets, tokens and monthly passes.

Design a map for the above system. Decide on names for the lines, stations and destinations. While you are at it, invent a new way of folding this very same map.

If you live somewhere without a subway system, design one for your village, town, city or county. Follow the instructions in the above two points. Use real names from your own locale.

Use real or imagined subway map elements in an abstracted artwork, any medium. Include the following; station names, linear elements, track graphics. Limit yourself to five colors (and their variations), plus black and white, and individual line numbers, codes or icons. You may include any other subway element in this piece as well, but keep it subtle.

Subway cars

Paint, draw or create train-model-size subway cars based on any of the following visual design ideas:

- Carousel animals, or mythological creatures
- Other modes of transportation such as cars, boats, trucks, airplanes or rockets
- Seed pods, plant forms or food items.

Paint, draw or create train-model-size subway cars based on any of the following functions:

- A dinner and movie car
- The poetry slam car
- A little kids' playtime car
- A create-more-time concept car for the way-too-busy
- The train-buff club car

Abstraction

Do a completely abstract work based on the sounds and/or smells of the subway. Do not include any recognizable objects. Use as many colors as you need.

Do a semi-abstract piece based on the movement of the trains; the speed, the rush, the screeching to a stop. Make the piece at least 50% abstract, but include at least 10% recognizable subject matter such as a hint of subway car. Limit your color palette to the minimum of what you need to express the movement of subway trains.

You may also do a piece similar to the above, based on the movement of people in the subway.

Portray the view out the window of a moving subway car as a blur.

Use the linear elements of the subway as the basis for an abstract piece, such as tracks, third rails, wires and pipes. Limit yourself to a maximum of 10% recognizable subject matter. Include at least three compositional triangles.

Portraiture

Do a portrait, or a series of portraits, or a group portrait of passengers focusing on the following things:

- The rows of feet lined up along the subway car floor. This works best if the car has two long rows of facing seats.
- Subway riders wearing hats. It's almost always an interesting variety, and they lend much personality.
- The hands of the passengers; on their laps, reading, fidgeting, holding things, folded.
- Where the gazes of the passengers lead to; closed eyes, lost out the window, flirting across the aisle.

Posters

Design a poster, or a series of posters, for subway stations and/or the inside the subway cars. Posters are used for advertising products, services, exhibits, concerts, and community events. They are also used for subway system announcements. For each thing that is advertised, decide on a limited color scheme, typography usage and graphic elements, which include many of the basic visual elements. Keep it visually clean and simple.

Create more of a fine art piece based on the above poster; where the edges are a little blurry, the meaning somewhat obscured, the words are almost gone, and the edges of the colors are not all so crisp.

Subway stations

Design or invent one or more stations for The State of Being subway line. Each station is named for a state of mind or emotion such as elation,

hysteria, contentment, anxiety, and/or hopefulness. Designate a color code for each station.

Design or invent a set of stations with the theme of each one being a different place, country or culture from around the world.

Design or invent a set of stations for places where there would really be no subway such as the middle of any possible nowhere, a small isolated town, or under the ocean. What would the stations be like? Consider their function.

Design a station for pure aesthetics. Pick a main color, a secondary color and an accent color (60%, 30% and 10% approximately). Choose materials, lines, masses and visual themes for the floor, walls, ceiling, benches, lighting, exits, signage (assuming that the ticket windows and shops are upstairs). For example; bright mid-tone green, blue and purple for anything painted. Light green, blue and purple for the tiled areas of the walls. The floors are dark shades of green and blue tiles. Patterns of diamonds, triangles and single thin stripes dominate as design elements. The ceilings are mostly a light blue. Pendant lamps are a medium green painted metal. And so on.

Design or create individual tiles, mosaic signage or a mosaic mural for a subway station wall. Include elements of where that particular station is located into the design. For example; a mosaic for a station in a park could include leaves, trees and squirrels. If the station is near an ice cream shop, include graphics of cones and various toppings. Tiles for a station near the waterfront might have fish and boat images pressed into them. Where is your station located?

Abandoned Factories

Abandoned factory elements – Smokestacks, chimneys, bricks, cinderblocks, peeling paint, gears, wheels, walls, broken windows, chain-link fence, wood palettes, massive, solid, hollow

Abandoned factory concepts – Old industrial city, working history, future gentrification, failure, changes in economy, empty

Abandoned factory free-write

Bits of bricks on sidewalk sticks a gated fence a chain-link mess, you have no idea the life that once revolved around here, where this is now nowhere to be found, torn-up stuff on the ground falling all around a dented wall a metal fall and locks on everything they used to sing, what did they make what did they create is it all on vacation now permanently away a broken broke holiday, but the pieces of bricks they stay...

Do a brainstorming, free-writing and/or word association session starting with any of the abandoned factory elements or concepts listed above.

What images do you see in your own writing? What can you make from what you now see?

Imagine a ghost factory, maybe on the outskirts of a ghost town. Create simple or complex scenes using imagery from your writing, and/or mine. Think about the ethereal spirits that labor inside the walls. What are they doing? What does the building look like, both inside and out? What do they make at this factory?

Patterns and geometry

Look at the geometrical structure of an old factory. Look at it from different perspectives, and find an angle that is visually pleasing to you. If there are multiple smokestacks and chimneys, notice the pattern, if any.

Create a semi-abstract piece in any medium based on the silhouette, geometry, angles and lines of the factory. Have the artwork be recognizable as an abandoned factory, but you can take liberties with the realism/abstraction

factor from there. Think about smoke, haziness, striking sunlight and/or elements from the factory's surroundings when working on your piece.

Create a completely abstract artwork based only on the pure visual elements from your chosen factory. Combine three large flat areas of outside wall, five to eight windows, one to four smokestacks and at least seven lines in any form or usage to make your composition. If working in color, have your palette be at least 90% of the actual factory coloring. The other 10% is up to you.

Create a representational work. Have the geometry and structure of the factory be a key visual element in your piece. Include at least one type of pattern, such as bricks or a row of smokestacks.

Sociology

An abandoned factory is not only an empty structure; it has a past, maybe some kind of a future, and definitely a human story. When a factory closes what happens to the workers, their families and the surrounding neighborhoods?

Do a portrait, or a series, of former factory personnel. Show their own personal story on each of their faces. These can be real or imagined people.

Portray a scene from the day that the real or imagined factory closed its doors.

Do a plein-air painting or drawing, or a series, detailing little vignettes focusing on the edges of the factory property. This might be where the chain-link fence meets the sidewalk weeds, or the shuttered gate with the sign saying "closed".

Portray the natural decay of the factory building and its various parts. Do a series showing this decay in a time-lapse format.

Do a drawing or a maquette about the interesting things you envision could be developed from the factory shell and the property.

Design a factory

What might the exterior of these possible factories look like? Have the design reflect both the practical and whimsical aspects of its manufacturing purpose.

- A toy musical instrument factory, with the smokestacks looking like trumpets
- A boredom factory (maker of products for when things get too exciting), where everything is beige
- A factory for imaginary bicycles
- A sandwich factory
- A bottle and jar factory
- A button factory
- A surprise factory