

**Visual Arts Lessons for Joe O'Donnell's  
*Japan 1945: A U.S. Marine's Photographs from Ground Zero*  
Grades 6-12**

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*"The people I met, the suffering I witnessed, and the scenes of incredible devastation taken by my camera cause me to question every belief I had previously held about by so called enemies. I left Japan with nightmare images etched on my negatives and in my heart."*— Joe O'Donnell

## LESSON: What's Going on in this Picture?

### Essential Questions:

- What are the benefits of student-led inquiry?
- How can individuals construct meaning and understanding from visual cues?
- How can inference be supported through visual cues?
- How does collaborative discussion create deeper understanding?

### Introduction:

In this lesson, students will utilize Visual Thinking Strategies to analyze a photograph and construct meaning from the visual information.

### Objectives:

Students will “read” an image and share their observations and interpretations with their class. Collectively, students will gain a deeper understanding of the narrative behind O’Donnell’s photograph(s).

### National Visual Arts Standards (grades 6-12):

Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

Anchor Standard 7. Perceive and analyze artistic work

Anchor Standard 8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Connecting: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

Anchor Standard 11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding

### Materials:

Printed reproductions of O’Donnell’s photographs (or projected images from the FCCEAS website).

#### Suggested Photographs:

- *Standing on the Roof* (page 12)
- *Passing the Cremation Site* (page 24)
- *Classroom* (page 73)
- *Cremation Site, Nagasaki* (page 74)

### Teacher Preparation:

Select the photograph(s) to be utilized, read the accompanying text from O’Donnell’s book along with the Historical and Cultural Context by John Frank.

Position the image in the classroom so that all students can see it. If possible, clear an area in front of the image so students can gather in front of it, instead of sitting at their desks.

Familiarize yourself with the three questions you will use to guide the inquiry:

1. *What’s going on in this picture?*
2. *What do you see that makes you say that?*
3. *What more can you find?*

For an overview of the process, watch the short video “Learning Visual Thinking Strategies” from Aperture Foundation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-YVvNiAm6Q>

**Time:**

Approximately 10-15 minutes discussion per photograph.

**Procedures:**

- Arrange the classroom so that students are able to clearly see the photographs. Depending on your method of display and size of the class, you may ask students to move their chairs in a semicircle or sit on the ground in front of a screen, or gather around an easel with for printed photo.
- Explain to students that you are going to show them an image and will give them 1-2 minutes for silent observation of the image. During this time, students can approach the image to look more closely, if they desire, but they should not say anything.
- Once students have examined the image, stand beside it and ask, ***“What’s going on in this picture?”***
- Call on students one at a time. For each student’s response, gesture to the image as they point out parts of the photograph and summarize what was said. [It is important to remain neutral towards each student’s comment. For instance, don’t say, *“Oh, great observation...”* This does two things: it reinforces and validates each student’s contribution and allows the group to hear what was said.]
- For statements that are interpretations, follow up with the question, ***“What do you see that makes you say \_\_\_\_?”*** Again gesturing to relevant areas of the image and summarizing the student’s statement.
- Once student participation wanes, ask the group, ***“Who sees something more/different?”*** [Don’t be afraid to wait a few moments for someone to respond.]
- Be certain to link student comments and make connections with prior learning/understandings.
- If students miss a key element, you may direct them by pointing to the area of the photograph and asking, ***“What about this?”***
- Once students have discussed the elements in the photograph, summarize the observations and interpretations, by again gesturing to relevant areas as you do.
- Following the conversation, you can share the information from O’Donnell and Frank the on the photo.

Notes on VTS method:

It’s important to stick to the scripted questions and remain neutral—this is more difficult than you may imagine. It may be helpful to have the questions posted where you can see them until you get used to the delivery. There’s a big difference in the responses you will get from asking, “What do you see in this photograph?” (items listed) compared to “What’s going on in this photograph?” (interpreted observation).

**Suggested Readings and Resources:**

“What’s Going on in this Picture: Intriguing Times images stripped of their captions -- and an invitation to students to discuss them live.”. The Learning Network. New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/column/learning-whats-going-on-in-this-picture>

Yenawine, Philip. Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines. Harvard Education Press. 2013