

National Art Gallery of The Bahamas

Lesson: Abstract Expressionism



Untitled (Rainbow Explosion) (1993), Kendal Hanna, Watercolour on paper, 13 x 16. Part of the National Collection.

**Adaptable to all age groups*

Overview:

In this lesson, students will be introduced to the history of Abstract Expressionism and explore its connection to music, feeling and emotion. They will become acquainted with the work of the Bahamian abstract expressionist painter, Kendal Hanna and ultimately create their own abstract painting.

Content:

Abstract expressionism is the term applied to new forms of abstract art developed by American painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning in the 1940s and 1950s. It is often characterised by gestural brush-strokes or mark-making, and the impression of spontaneity. (*Tate*). Abstract expressionists broke away from traditional techniques and subject matter and instead tapped into their individual psyches and **emotions**. These artists valued spontaneity and improvisation, and they placed the highest importance on the process. In this kind of artwork, there is an emphasis on **rhythm, gestures and energetic movements**. (*Met Museum*). Abstract Expressionism was also influenced by the improvisational (spontaneous) nature of jazz and many artists claimed to listen to music while they painted.

Kendal Hanna (b. 1936) is considered one of the first Bahamian abstract painters. Hanna was diagnosed with schizophrenia early in his life, but this has not hindered his artistic practice. He is 84 years old and still makes work to this day. He has been featured in exhibitions locally at the NAGB as well as internationally. His painting *Untitled (Rainbow Explosion)* is a part of the National Collection along with a few others, including *Environmental Force* (2005) pictured on the right.

Environmental Force (2005), Kendal Hanna, oil on masonite, 47 x 35 in. Part of the National Collection acquired from the NE3.



Other terms:

- **Objective art** - art that depicts something recognisable from life (i.e. a still life)
- **Non-objective art** - art that does not have a clearly distinguishable subject matter
- **Rhythm** - a principle of design, often created by repetition of line. It's the visual effect that causes your eye to move or dance across a composition. Types of rhythm: flowing, regular, alternating.

Discussion:

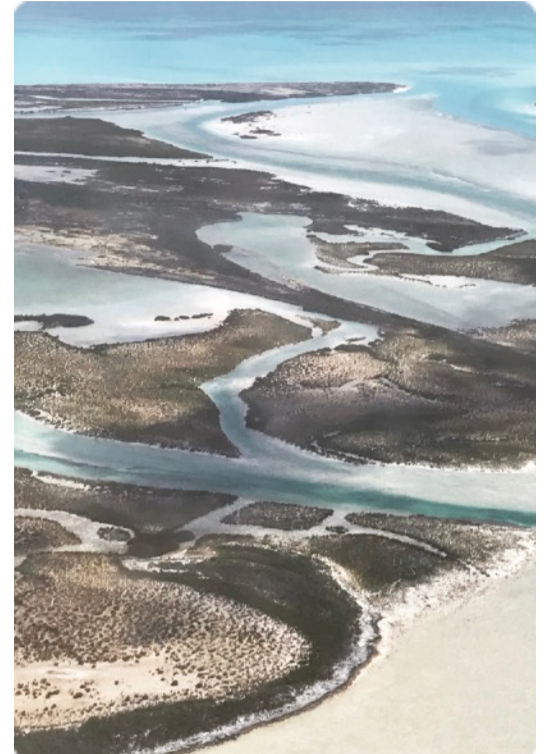
Discuss the main characteristics of Abstract Expressionism and how this style of work differs from representational painting. Introduce the terms objective and non-objective as alternatives. Ask students to identify some feelings and emotions they would associate with *Rainbow Explosion* (1993) and *Environmental Force* (2005) and why? You will discuss the connotations of colours and why certain colours make us feel or think particular things. (i.e. blue makes me think of water; it is calming). Further discussion questions can include:

- What do you think the artist was thinking when he made these paintings?
- Do you think he was in a quiet place or was he listening to music while he made this painting? Justify your answer.

Activities:

1. Students will conduct preliminary research on Abstract Expressionism to get a deeper understanding of the art movement. Require students to make notes of key dates, influential artists, formal characteristics of paintings (form, line, texture, colour) and any other relevant information.
2. Have students research the life and work of Kendal Hanna. They should include key information such as his birth date and place, background, influences and style of work. Students will write a short report (1 page) or create a short video (2 mins).
3. Instruct students to find a song that they love, or a song that makes them feel happy, sad, excited etc. They will use the chosen song as inspiration and will listen to the song as they create an abstract painting. Alternatively, students can take a series of photos that show repetition in

nature or the environment. They can then use these photos as inspiration to complete their paintings, but they should **not** try to draw them from observation. Reference Hanna's *Environmental Force* (2005) here. Examples of rhythm in the Bahamian landscape below:



Materials:

- Paper (alternatives: canvas, cardboard)
- Paint of various colours (alternatives: pastels, charcoal, pencils, crayons)
- Paintbrushes

**Remember to be flexible with your students and allow them to use different materials based on their needs. Encourage them to use materials in unconventional ways.*

Links to other resources:

- [Brigidy Bam: The Kendal Hanna Story](#)
- [The Bahamian Project](#)
- [D'Aguilar Art Foundation: Kendal Hanna Biography and History](#)

