

## Discovering Stories in Art

Visual art provides students with immediate access to the characteristics of good storytelling, while allowing critical observers to "enter the frame" and experience situations from alternative points of view. See how this works with the narrative art of Edith Neff.



### Swimming Pool at Hunting Park

by Edith Neff  
1975-76

This painting was carefully composed by Edith Neff to tell a story about children at a pool in Philadelphia on a summer day. Details of facial expressions and body language communicate a story about a particular moment in time.

### Let's explore elements of a story in an artwork:

Character(s)   Setting   Plot   Conflict   Point of View

### CHARACTER(S) Questions to inspire careful looking:

What figures do you see?

Look at their poses, gestures, and facial expressions. What does this tell you about each person?

Look closely at the people's clothing. What does their clothing tell you?

Where is each figure placed in the painting?

Where is each looking? How does that affect where you look and what you think about the story?

What objects appear? What is their importance in this setting?

# Woodmere Art Museum

TELLING THE STORY OF PHILADELPHIA'S ART AND ARTISTS

There are many characters in this painting. Let's look carefully by observing the groups of figures in three different sections of the image: center, right, and left.



In the **center**, we see a group of three African American boys clustered together on the edge of a pool.

The youngest boy, in front, is crawling out of the pool. He is the only child in this group of three that appears to be smiling.

What could be a reason he is smiling?

Is he smiling, or is that an hypothesis? Could it be a painful expression? What is the evidence for your hypothesis?

Behind him, an older boy sits on the pool's edge. His mouth is open and water is dripping out. His facial expression is ambiguous. Is he catching his breath and tired or troubled?

Look at the pose of the boy behind him. He is holding his head in his hand and covers his face. One elbow is in between his bent knees.

What might his pose suggest about the way he is feeling?

**Behind this center** group, an older girl is walking by the pool with her back to us. Look under her elbow. We see a boy in swimming trunks.



He is smiling and leaning forward. What is he about to do?

We see the girl's profile. Her mouth is open, as if she is talking to someone. Her right arm extends outward toward the pool. To whom could she be gesturing? What might she be saying?

Do you see anyone else in this painting gesturing or talking to another person? What does that tell you about the scene?

Look at the children in the pool. What do you notice?

One of the children in the pool has her mouth open and is sticking her tongue out. The other two children in the pool have their backs to us, swimming away and do not appear to be interacting with the other girl.

To whom is she sticking out her tongue?

Is it the girl walking on the pavement, the center group of boys, the boy about to jump into the pool or the viewer?

Or is her mouth open because she is catching her breath?

A large, red ball floats in the pool nearby. Why is it there? How is it part of the story?

On the **left**, we see a young boy walking forward.



We see his reflection in the water on the pavement. Where is he looking? Straight ahead, as if looking at us.

Describe the expression on his face? It looks serious.

Do you think he is walking fast or slow? What do you see that tells you that?

Where might he be going?

An African American girl is sitting on a green bench behind the boy.

Look at her shoulders, hands and feet. What does her pose suggest about the way she could be feeling?

Look at her face. She too gazes forward as if looking directly at us.

What does her facial expression convey? Could she be squinting as if the sun is in her eyes; does she look irritated, uncomfortable?

How old do you think she is? What could she be thinking?

## **SETTING: Questions to inspire careful looking:**

**Where does this image take place?**

Children are at a pool.

**What time of the year is it? What tells us that?**

It looks like late spring or summer because the trees are full of green leaves. It must be warm because most of the people are wearing swimming suits.

**Is this scene an image from long ago, right now, or in the future? What tells you that?**

This image reminds me of a day this past summer. The swimming suits, shorts, T-shirts, and haircuts look similar to what people wear today.

**Describe the colors you see. What does that tell you about the weather on the day pictured in this painting?**

The sky is bright blue with white puffy clouds. Lots of bright green and orange in the background building. All the colors are bright indicating a lovely, sunny day.

**What mood do the colors of this setting convey?**

The colors seem cheerful and bright.

## How does the artist convey a sense of space and distance?



Strong diagonals of the pool, pavement and fence create a deep space that moves our eye into the distance where we see a large pavilion in the background.

Its large size and the vibrant orange, green and white design make it noticeable and pop forward.

Artists create patterns of colors in a painting to move our eye throughout the scene. Look at the colors of objects in the setting, the clothing, hair and skin color of the people. What colors create connections between people and the setting?

Blue of the sky connects with the blue water in the pool and reflections of water on the pavement.

Greens in the trees connect with the roof of the building and the green bench where African American girl on the left is sitting.

Brown skin colors connect the African American children; white skin tones connect the Caucasian children.

Black hair color connects children in the pool, African American boys coming out of the pool, African American girl sitting on the green bench.

### Looking Deeper:

Review questions and comments from previous observations;

Analyze observations to weave together a story.

What could be the **PLOT** and **CONFLICT** in this story?

Take a **POINT OF VIEW** and tell the story from that character's perspective.

Think about how most of the children in this painting are not physically interacting with one another. Even the strong, diagonal lines of the pool, pavement, and fence separate the spaces of the children in this setting.

The girl in the center who is walking with her back to us is gesturing with her arm to those in the pool. You noticed her mouth is open. What might she be saying?

What could be a reason the girl in the pool is sticking out her tongue?  
Could she be catching her breath or is she sticking her tongue out at someone?  
Who?

What story could you tell from these figures?

Pretend you are one of the characters. What are you thinking?

What are you feeling?

Let's look at the three African American boys in the foreground.

What could be a reason the youngest African American boy crawling out of the pool is smiling?

Is the boy behind him with water dripping from his mouth, catching his breath and tired or troubled?

What does the pose of the boy covering his face and holding his head in his hand suggest?

What might be the relationship between these three boys?



Think about the big red ball nearby. What role could it play in this story?

Imagine if the ball was blue like the water in the pool. Would we notice it as easily?

The artist places the ball up front in the foreground. What could be a reason the artist makes sure we notice it?

What is the relationship, if any, between the ball and the water on the pavement?

What could be the relationship between the ball and the three boys coming out of the pool or is it just a coincidence they are nearby?

Were the other children in the pool playing with the ball? Or

Were all the children playing together in the pool with the ball? Or

Could someone else have thrown the ball into the pool? Who? Or

Could the ball have been left by others we do not see?

Who thinks there could be a relationship between the three boys, the girl walking in the center, the red ball, and the children in the pool? What might this relationship be?

Look carefully at the boy on the left walking forward. Pay attention to his facial expression, arms and feet. Do you think he is walking quickly or at a regular pace? Where might he be going? What could be on his mind? How might he be connected with the red ball and all the other children? How many of you think there is no connection?

What is the role of the African American girl sitting on a green bench in this story? What does her facial expression convey? How old do you think she is? What could she be thinking about? Could she have a relationship with someone else in this scene? What makes her sit by herself?

If you were in this painting, where would you want to be?

The colors of the setting, the blue sky, trees full of green leaves, orange, green and white of the pavilion, and large space of blue pool water, portray a bright and sunny day. What is the relationship between the mood of these colors and the stories you've described of the children in this painting?

What clues make you think they are having fun? (Or not)

Have ever had a day like this? What is similar or different from your experiences?

## Providing historical context of the time and history of the setting.



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA  
Swimmers celebrate opening day of the Hunting Park Pool on June 18, 1944.

This is a public pool in Philadelphia in the Hunting Park neighborhood in North Philadelphia. The pavilion in the background still exists. As documented in a photograph of opening day in 1944, the pool attracted a happy, robust group of (mostly) white and black children. Unlike private pools and swim clubs, most of which were officially segregated, public pools in Philadelphia were not segregated. However, segregation happened as a result of prejudices, the vague nature of rules, and the changing socio-economic context of neighborhoods.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 abolished segregation in all public places, but nationwide it took years to break down the barriers and social practices that kept pools segregated. Pools in North Philadelphia, like the Hunting Park Pool, as well as a few other public and private pools in Mount Airy and West Philadelphia, led the way with pools that celebrated integration.

Today the community around Hunting Park celebrates the multicultural heritage of its Latino, Puerto Rican, and African American residents, who make up the majority of this neighborhood's population.



This is a photograph taken at Hunting Park Pool in Philadelphia in 2018. The pavilion pictured in the painting still stands today.

**What effect does the history of public pools have on how you see the story in this painting?**

## About the Artist, EDITH NEFF



“I’ve always been a Philadelphia artist. These are the streets I grew up in, the people I knew, my own family. I am interested in exploring the ordinary and the familiar.”

Edith Neff, (1943-1995), a leading realist painter of her day, was praised for her dynamic compositions, her sophisticated use of color, and her ability to portray drama in everyday life. She explored questions of race, gender, and identity, probing the social and cultural fabric of Philadelphia.

Working from photographs she took herself, Neff made paintings of her family, fellow artists and colleagues, friends, neighbors, and students. She would rearrange figures and settings from different photographs to compose her paintings. The city itself was central to her work: its public buildings, playgrounds, parks, pools, schools, and beaches were frequent settings.

Contemporary realism began in the 1960s and 1970s. Artists that used this style focused on the “real” and not the “ideal”. Paintings generally reflected an “immediate environment”, showing people, landscapes, and scenes from everyday life.

A lifelong resident of Philadelphia, Neff received her BFA in painting from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). In 1978, she joined the faculty at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), where she taught figure painting and drawing until her death in 1995. Neff’s work is in corporate and public collections including the Philadelphia Museum of Art and PAFA.