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45th & Oak, Kansas City, Missouri

Teacher Guide | May 7 – October 9, 2022



American photographer Jim Dow (born 1942) is fascinated by the ways in which signs and buildings offer a window into everyday American culture. Early in his career, Dow spent a decade driving across the United States, following the network of older highways that, with the establishment of the interstate system, were falling into disuse. Along the way, he photographed structures and signage that had been erected during the heyday of early automobile travel but were often in the process of becoming outdated or abandoned. His photographs from this period draw attention to elements of the built environment that may escape our notice and encourage us to think about the passage of time itself.

Educators are invited to use this guide to engage students in examining *Signs: Photographs by Jim Dow* and creating their own photographs inspired by Dow's work.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

You will see 76 photographs, all taken by Jim Dow. Of these, 62 are in black and white and were taken between 1967 and 1977. The remaining 14 images are in color and date to more recent years from the 1980s through the 2010s.

The photographs are arranged in six thematic sections:

- **Early influences** (with an emphasis on Dow's interest in the photography of Walker Evans)
- **Slow photography** (highlighting the lengthy process Dow undertakes to consider and set up each image)
- **Leaving familiar confines** (follows Dow's travels along U.S. highways)
- **Things in time** (illustrating Dow's interest in signs and structures as evidence of time passing)
- **The oil crisis** (reveals Dow's commitment to cross-country movement, despite the challenges posed by high gas prices in the 1970s)
- **A shift to color** (featuring color photographs from the later part of Dow's career)

GOOD TO KNOW

This exhibition is on view in the museum's photography galleries (Galleries L10 and L11).

The photographs in this exhibition range in size, with most images measuring approximately 8 x 10," making them viewable by 2–3 people at a time.

In addition to the exhibition itself, you may wish to view the adjacent photography rotation gallery. In that space, you can see a display of photographs from the museum's permanent collection that were selected by Jim Dow to accompany and complement his own work.

All works from the exhibition and the rotation can also be viewed online at the following links:

Exhibition: art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6326/signs-photographs-by-jim-dow/objects

Rotation: art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6327/photography-rotation-selections-by-jim-dow/objects

Discussion questions in this guide are categorized as:

INQUIRING EYE – focused on the formal qualities of photographic images;

ART, PLACE, TIME – consider how photographs can convey the character of a place and/or the passage of time;

ARTIST AS OBSERVER – activity prompts for student photographers.

BEFORE VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

Jim Dow's photographs draw attention to signs that advertise all kinds of businesses and products. Challenge students to observe signage in the world around them by having them take a photograph of every sign they see over the course of one day. Then, share the images as a class and discuss:

- What kinds of imagery, messaging, and function are most common among the signs you saw?
- What kinds of environments were these signs located within (e.g. along the side of the road, on the sides of buildings, inside businesses, etc.)?
- Did you see any signs that struck you as particularly interesting, visually appealing, or unusual?

Dow's travels through the United States, along with the careful attention he devoted to the subjects he photographed along the way, enabled him to learn about new places. Have students discuss the following questions related to the idea of place:

- What experience do you have with traveling to new places?
 - Think about the last time you went to a new or unfamiliar place. What did you notice first? Did you form an impression of that place right away, or did it take a while for you to get a sense of its character? What details contributed to your impression of that place?
 - Think about a place you know well. What quality or mood do you associate with it? If you wanted to take a photograph that conveyed its quality or mood, what would you include in your image?
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FEATURED WORKS



INQUIRING EYE

These two photographs, taken in different locations, share a similar subject: roadside ice cream stands. Consider the visual elements that make up each image, such as shape, line, form, light, space, and composition. What visual qualities do the two images have in common? How do they differ?

ART, PLACE, TIME

A sense of isolation permeates many of Dow's photographs. How is that feeling of isolation conveyed in these images?



ARTIST AS OBSERVER

In both of these scenes, we see structures that rely on oversized, sculpted ice cream cones to attract attention and draw people to a particular place. Look around your own community for signs or structures that are trying to draw people in. How could you compose a photograph of that subject to suggest a particular mood or sense of place?

Cone on Closed Soft-Serve Stand. US 6E, Carbondale, Pennsylvania, 1973

Lone Cone in Field. US 209, Carbon County, Pennsylvania, 1973



"Pittsfield School of Dance" Window.
Pittsfield, New Hampshire, 1971

INQUIRING EYE

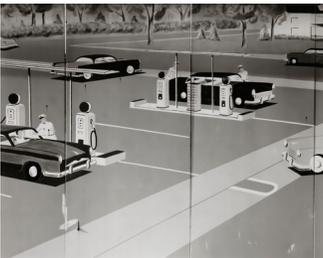
In composing this photograph, Dow considered not only the window display itself, but also the reflection that is superimposed on the windowpane. How do those elements work together to create an interesting composition?

ART, PLACE, TIME

Dow is interested in signage that shows evidence of having been made by hand or affected by the passage of time. How is this window display representative of both those qualities?

ARTIST AS OBSERVER

The imperfections of this window display were what drew Dow to it as a potential subject. See if you can take a photograph of an "imperfect" sign, structure, or object in your own environment. How could you highlight the uniqueness of your subject in the image you create?



Gas Station Painting on Sign. US 19,
Albany, Georgia, 1975

INQUIRING EYE

In photographing this portion of a gas station sign, Dow chose to fill the frame entirely with this painted scene. How does that affect your impression of the image – would it change things if we saw more of the sign and its surroundings?

ART, PLACE, TIME

What details do you see here that suggest a particular time period? What details suggest a particular atmosphere or type of place? Do you think this painted sign accurately represents the place in which it was displayed? Why or why not?

ARTIST AS OBSERVER

Dow's roadside photographs often show us advertisements that promised consumers a certain type of experience. See if you can take a photograph that depicts some aspect of advertising or marketing as it exists in contemporary society.



Fire Hydrant & Stucco Teepee Bus Shelter. Old US 80, now TX 20,
Canutillo, Texas, 1975

INQUIRING EYE

The lens Dow used to take this photograph creates a round vignette around the image. Does that affect the way you interpret this scene? If so, how?

ART, PLACE, TIME

Some of the scenes Dow observed during his travels across America reveal a curious juxtaposition of past and present. Where do you see that in this photograph?

ARTIST AS OBSERVER

Dow speculates that this teepee-shaped bus station and fire hydrant were built in a rural Texas border town "in anticipation of houses that never came." Think about places or situations that might be similar in your area, and take a photograph that shows something unfinished, abandoned, or otherwise left behind by the march of time.



Abandoned Religious Sign. US 60, Sikeston, Missouri, 1980

INQUIRING EYE

What do you notice about the use of positive and negative space in this photograph?
What do you notice about the alignment of lines and shapes?

ART, PLACE, TIME

Why might an artist who is interested in signs take a photograph in which a sign is conspicuously missing? How might this image relate to Dow's interest in photography as a way to document the passage of time?

ARTIST AS OBSERVER

Take a photograph in which the most important or meaningful element is the absence of something you would expect to be present.

AFTER VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

Stop in to the photography rotation gallery (next to the exhibition galleries) to view the photographs Jim Dow selected for display, drawing on the museum's permanent collection. What connections can students find between these works and Dow's own photographs?

Challenge students to take a trip to an unfamiliar place and document what they see and experience along the way. The trip doesn't need to be grand – a bus ride to a new part of town would work just as well as a cross-country road trip. Have students record their observations of the trip in images and/or words. What signs or structures caught their eye? What felt familiar and unfamiliar about the places and people they saw? What surprised them? What would they want to convey to others about the place(s) they visited?

IMAGE CREDITS

All images by Jim Dow, American (born 1942).

Cone on Closed Soft-Serve Stand. US 6E, Carbondale, Pennsylvania, 1973. Gelatin silver print, 7 11/16 x 9 11/16 in. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2018.51.3.

Lone Cone in Field. US 209, Carbon County, Pennsylvania, 1973. Gelatin silver print, 7 11/16 x 9 11/16 in. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2018.51.29.

"Pittsfield School of Dance" Window. Pittsfield, New Hampshire, 1971. Gelatin silver print, 7 7/8 x 9 11/16 in. Gift of jim and Jacquie Dow, 2018.55.3.

Gas Station Painting on Sign. US 19, Albany, Georgia, 1975. Gelatin silver print, 15 7/8 x 20 1/16 in. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2018.51.21.

Fire Hydrant & Stucco Teepee Bus Shelter. Old US 80, now TX 20, Canutillo, Texas, 1975. Gelatin silver print, 7 11/16 x 9 11/16 in. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2018.51.52.

Abandoned Religious Sign. US 60, Sikeston, Missouri, 1980. Inkjet print, 8 x 10 ¼ in. Gift of Jim and Jacquie Dow, 2021.41.12.