ALL LEVELS

Pantry PAINTING

Charity-Mika Woodard

When my school transitioned to remote learning in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was at a loss for how to take my studio art class into the virtual world. I love the studio setting because it allows students to try out different art materials and experiment in a safe space.

As we closed school, I tried to gather up bags of art supplies for students to take home because not everyone is fortunate enough to have a well-stocked house full of art supplies. I knew that teaching students remotely would mean I would need to be creative with my material choices. My state is under a shelter-in-place order, and because of that, we can only go out when it's absolutely necessary.

Painting without Paint

As an art teacher, I wanted to give my students the challenge of painting. I knew from research that creating art during stressful times can help with anxiety and be a distraction from what might be going on at home or in students' other online classes. But I knew that not everyone would have watercolors at home. So, what would happen if they didn't have any paint?

I didn't want students to go out to the store for a set of watercolors or have to buy something on the internet that might not ship for a week. I also thought about students whose family might be struggling financially; I didn't want that family to spend precious resources on art supplies instead of food. The main goal of my painting lesson was for students to make do with what they already had, so I went to my kitchen to find alternatives.

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Small mountain landscape paintings created by layering instant coffee.

Food Coloring

I found many items that I thought would probably work in place of watercolor paint. The first thing I tried was food coloring and it worked perfectly. I used a couple of drops in a ¼ cup of water. Next, sanding sugar or "sprinkles," as we call them in my house, worked the same way. I dissolved the sanding sugar in hot water, and it turned into a delicate watercolor wash.

Spices and Other Items

I also experimented with pantry spices such as paprika, mustard seed, and turmeric. I had two different types of paprika in my kitchen: an old container of regular paprika and a large jar of smoked paprika from a discount store. As far as color, there was no difference between the two.

Above: Watercolor paint alternatives created with water and various pantry items. Below: A color block painting created with a variety of spice mixes.

The one spice that didn't work was the mustard seed—it was grainy and didn't give off much color.

The other things I found in my kitchen were tea bags, instant coffee, strong brewed coffee, and powdered fruit juice mix.

Experimentation

I experimented by mixing each of the pantry items in ¼ to ⅓ cup of hot water, but found no exact recipe. I was going for watercolor washes, making sure the spices fully dissolved in the water so the liquid wouldn't be grainy. I let each of the mixes sit overnight, hoping they would gain strength, but that only really affected the tea.

I used the instant coffee to experiment with value scale while creating several small mountain landscapes. For each landscape, I painted my entire square first, then I painted the mountain range section, building up the layers of instant coffee to create rich, dark colors. It's essential that you let each layer dry completely before adding more coffee, or your paintbrush will pick up and take off previous layers.

I also created a color block painting using the spice mixes as a background. When the background was dry, I drew wildflowers on top of the "paint" with a permanent marker. I was surprised by the number of pantry items I found that could be used as paint, and it reminded me that any problem has a creative solution!

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RESOURCE

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