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Teaching Creative Design Process: *Grey Gardens* Documentary as a Source of Inspiration

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In an effort to further support the development of creative design skills in the student body a special topics course was developed for Spring 2013. The instructor identified students that exhibited exceptional skill in two separate sections of fashion illustration the previous semester. These students were then invited to participate in this experimental course. Course objectives were to:

1. further develop, engage and provide collaborative creative studio opportunities for our best students,
2. enhance fashion presentation skills in illustration, rendering, layout and line development; and
3. exhibit innovative approaches to assignments that provide structure yet promote creativity and new ideas.

Structured projects generated interesting yet different outcomes. Students were provided with a source of inspiration and defined process as outlined below. In this presentation, the authors will describe the second project in the class in which *Grey Gardens* was the source of inspiration used by each student. Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale and Edith Bouvier Beale (known commonly as big and little Edie) were mother and daughter with the elder being the paternal aunt of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. They made an international sensation in the mid-1970s when it was discovered that they were living in squalor in a dilapidated East Hampton, NY mansion known as Grey Gardens. A subsequent documentary named for the house was made and has since permeated the American cultural vernacular through translations in art, fashion, cinema and musical theater.

Students were asked to watch the documentary and complete thumbnail sketches inspired specifically by the costume choices of little Edie. The younger of the Edies, whom suffered from alopecia (chronic hair loss), had adopted a specific style of bohemian dress that was an amalgamation of tattered and mismatched items that somehow worked. She would always wrap something around her head to hide her thinning hair, but it could be anything from a scarf, sweater, jacket or even a skirt. Little Edie would state, "I have to think these things up, you know?"¹ As the silhouette choices of Ms. Beale were so distinctive students started the creative

¹ *Grey Gardens*. Directed by Albert Maysles and Robert Maysles. Performed by Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale

process with an examination of this design element. From there the following steps for the challenge were evaluated:

1. Development of mood board and color palette
2. Development of print and embellishment
3. Final selection of silhouettes
4. Incorporation of scaled poses to create depth and interest in layout
5. Rendering of croquis and completion of layout
6. Tech flat incorporation
7. Final layout and presentation

Group critique provided direction at each phase of the project. The students created a window display to highlight their work. In fact, students were so inspired by the film they have adopted phrases from the documentary into their every day conversations. The project provided an opportunity to introduce students to these women that have had a lasting impression on popular culture and commerce while expanding their creative horizons.

This project demonstrates that students can be inspired to create innovative work when cultural references are incorporated into the curriculum. Good design is an interpretation of culture, surroundings, emotions and ideas. Projects of this nature that define a source of inspiration help to move students beyond mastering skill and instead elevate their approach to the design process. In addition, focusing on top performing students and providing a studio for them to work collaboratively seems to accelerate learning as demonstrated in these outcomes.



Figure 1 Example of student work by Mackenzie McArthur (photo courtesy of the author).

The presentation will include a description of the course and project, a brief introduction to the history of big & little Edie, visual examples of student process work and final outcomes, student feedback on the project, and how the project will be changed if implemented in future classes.