

## On the Edge: Exploring the Work of Jordan Matter

**Inspiration:** Jordan Matter (American, b. 1966). *Vista*, 2011. Digital photograph on aluminum. Gift of the artist, 2016 ([2016.06](#)).

**Ages:** 5+

**Duration:** Open-ended

**Materials:** Paper and pencil; smartphone camera or other digital camera with a self timer.

**Introduction:** Artists from the eighteenth century to the present have consistently grappled with the concept of the sublime, defined in 1757 by Edmund Burke as an artistic effect, or effects, that produces the strongest emotions the human mind is capable of feeling. In landscape art, the inclusion of a human figure in the composition is a common technique artists use to engage with the emotions of the viewer. Identifying with these figures draws the viewer into the larger scene and can elicit a strong connection or response to it. This approach is evident in classic works by well-known Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole, Jasper Frances Cropsey, and Asher B. Durand. Contemporary artists like Jordan Matter follow this approach to representing the sublime in landscape art through their use of modern technologies, mediums, and staging.



## Look

Take a close look at *Vista*.

- What’s going on in this work?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

## Think

- What emotions do you feel when viewing this image? Why?
- How does the position and location of the dancer, Evgeniya Chernukhina, affect the way you react emotionally to this image?
- How does the implied position of the photographer affect your impression of and understanding of the image? Why?
- How does the fact that this work is a photograph staged in real time, versus a painting or drawing, affect your reaction to the scene?

## Connect

Known for his portraiture and for his work in the commercial and entertainment spheres, Jordan Matter is a contemporary photographer whose practice extends to nontraditional landscape works like *Vista*. The image is part of his portrait series *Dancers Among Us*, which Matter conceived and shot throughout different regions and environments of the United States as a means of subverting the typical way dancers appear in photographs—in sterile studio settings or staged in beautiful outdoor settings. Matter aims to incorporate play, joy, and private moments in his photos, as well as to evoke elements of surprise and the unexpected through his choice of location, his position in relation to the subject, and the physical direction of the dancers themselves. *Vista* is both familiar and shocking.

The view of the Hudson River and the Palisades, with the classic stone construction of the Fort Tryon Park overlook in Upper Manhattan in the foreground, are well-known and recognizable landmarks. It is the unexpected juxtaposition of dancer Chernukhina teetering in an arabesque on the edge of the overlook that transforms this portrait and landscape into something more surreal and anxiety producing, despite the beauty of the setting and the classic dancer’s form.

## Do

1. Begin by reflecting on a particular emotion—fear, joy, anger, confusion, surprise, love—and making a list about what locations, situations, people, events, and other factors bring this emotion out in you.
2. Next, look at individual elements of this list and add a column of contradictory locations, situations, people, events, and other factors for each one. For example, if you are reflecting on the emotion of joy and said that being with loved ones makes you feel this emotion, a contradictory statement might be “being alone.”

3. Next, experiment with different combinations of words from each list as a foundation for a setting or situation that includes elements from both columns.
4. Using this written foundation, stage a *tableau vivant*, or living picture, which is a representation of a scene, picture, etc., by a person or group in costume, posing silently without moving. If you have the option, you can take a photo of this staged scene using a self timer on a smartphone or digital camera, or if someone is working with you on this activity, you can photograph one another in your preferred setting and pose.

### Reflect

What was it like to go through this process, from initial brainstorming and reflecting to thinking of contradictory statements to physically enacting a scene? What part of the process was most challenging? What part was the easiest? Which part did you enjoy the most? If you had access to unlimited locations, costumes, actors, and props, what more would you add to your *tableau vivant*, or portrait, and why?

### Share

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #JordanMatter #MuseumFromHome, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.