

REFOCUSING HISTORY



Priya Kambli, Dada Aajooaba and Dadai Aaji, 2012

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS



In what ways do artists talk about their heritage?



How are histories manipulated?



Why is it important to speak about humanity's past?

INTRODUCTION

History has never been an objective record of humanity's past. There have always been parts of our history that have been left out or only spoken about briefly without the full context given. The artists included in this instructional resource use their practice to draw attention back to those histories that have been marginalized or left out of the conversation, and to fully understand their own histories.

In my own teaching practice I hope to encourage students to question what they see and to explore their interests, no matter what subject they might fall in. Art can be considered a first-person account of history therefore I want my future students to be comfortable analyzing an artwork and discovering its historical context.

I firmly believe that there must be more representation and diversity in the classroom. I believe that by teaching students about artists such as these we can foster empathy in the classroom and expose students to artists who have experiences similar to their own.

STAN SQUIREWELL

The Artist

Stan Squirewell is a painter, photographer, installation and performance artist. For most of his life he believed his family was of African descent, but it wasn't until his grandmother died that he found out he is a descendent of indigenous Americans. His practice is built on issues of identity and self-recognition and draws on inspiration from indigneous storytelling and science fiction movies.

The Artwork

In *Ro*, Squirewell uses collage to create an iconography that is both anicent and contemporary. This series portrays people of color in the same ways we may see the ancient Greeks or Romans. He does this by fusing 16th, 17th, and 18th century aesthetics with pop culture references. Squirewell portrays Black figures in an empowered way, causing the viewer to think about how history is manipulated and curated.



Stan Squirewell, *Ro*, 2019, Mixed media collage & shou sugi ban carved frame, 46h x 29w inches



"My roots are here now, discovering my true background gave me a homeland, an identity and a place of origin."

Interview with the artist

<https://www.hungertv.com/editorial/stan-squirewell-is-the-harlem-artist-creating-regal-portraits-of-black-history/>

Squirewell also creates the frames that his work is exhibited in. They are marked with motifs from ancient African and indigenous American cultures and then burned. He employs the same burning technique in his collages by scorching the edges of each layer.

Looking Questions

- What historic iconography do you see in this piece?
- Why do you think Squirewell creates his own frames?
- Have you see pieces similar to this in a museum? What did they look like?
- What makes the person in this image look regal?

ACTIVITY

Students will brainstorm as a class or in pairs to identify symbols and items that represent them or their families. They will then use collage to create a portrait of themselves using these symbols.



Stan Squirewell, *Afrosaxon III*, 2019, Mixed media collage & shou sugi ban carved frame, 30h x 25w inches



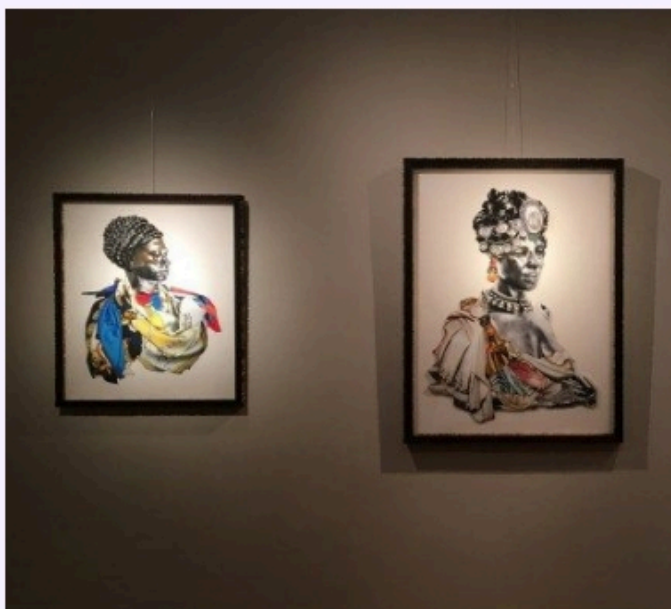
Stan Squirewell creating a shou sugi ban carved frame

Once the collage has been made students will consider the ways they want the piece to be exhibited. Will they create a frame for the piece? Will the piece be matted? Should it be hung at eye level, viewed flat or leaned against the wall? Student should consider the audience when making these choices. Student can be encourage to add ornamentation to the frame or to the mat board.



Guiding Questions

- How would you describe yourself?
- What are some images or symbols that you associate with these traits?
- What are some of your favorite things?



Stan Squirewell's work hung in the *Burning Art as Reclamation* Exhibition at at Gallery 8 in 2019.

ANA MENDIETA

The Artist

Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta used performance, sculpture, film, and drawing to discuss the spiritual nature connecting the body and nature. When she was 12 she entered the United States as a refugee, leaving much of her family behind in a traumatic separating from her culture. This experience inspired much of her work where she frequently used her body in violent contexts.



Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas (Image from Yagul)*, 1973

Looking Questions

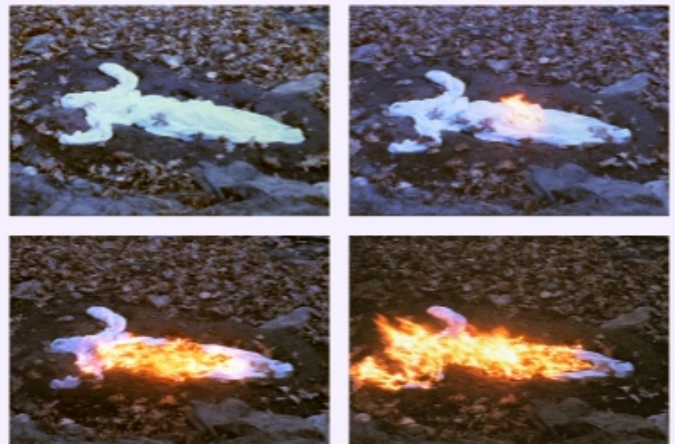
- How are these pieces performative?
- What do you think it would have been like to see these made?
- How would you feel if you came across one of the *Siluetas* on your own?



Mendieta was seeking the “one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy.”

The Artwork

Beginning in 1973, Mendieta created over 200 silhouettes in her *Siluetas* series. These earth-body works created a dialogue between the female body and the landscape and reestablished her bonds with nature, broken by her exile from her home country of Cuba. The works were inspired by the pantheistic Santería religion and she traveled to Cuba to install these works in the national park to be found by future visitors but they all deteriorated. The works live on through photographs and film.



Ana Mendieta, *Silueta en Fuego*, 1976



Ana Mendieta, *Silueta en Fuego*, 1976



Guiding Questions

- What are some ways you interact with nature?
- What marks do humans leave on the earth?

ART ACTIVITY

Students will brainstorm all of the ways they interact with nature. Then they will consider what objects they could find outside to make a silhouette of their own. Students will then take a field trip outside to collect materials. Students can then create works in a variety of media such as glueing leaves to board or making a rock sculpture to create an outline of themselves. Students can then consider where they would display the piece. Should the piece be placed back in the park where the materials used in its creation were found? Or should the silhouettes be displayed in the school?



Ana Mendieta, *Blood and Feathers* (2), 1974, color photograph

NONA FAUSTINE

The Artist

Nona Faustine is a Brooklyn-based photographer and visual artist. Her work focuses on the places where history and identity intersect.

The Artwork

This image is part of a series entitled *White Shoes*. In this series Faustine occupies spaces in New York City in white shoes with a white skirt or sometimes nude. Each location is an unmarked slave site where slaves were auctioned or buried. While occupying these spaces in such a vulnerable way Faustine performs the experiences of million of African women before her. Through this vulnerability she unmasks the true history of these spaces. She will not allow the financial core of New York to forget the role Black bodies played in American capitalism.



"Black women came off the slave ships as feminists. There was no one there to protect us."

Profile of the artist

<https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/in-brooklyn-three-generations-in-family-photos-nona-faustine/?mcubz=0>



Nona Faustine. *'...a thirst for complet freedom... had been her only motive for absconding.'* Oney Judge, Federal Hall, NYC, 2016, Photograph



Nona Faustine, untitled (work-in-progress), 2019-20

Activity

Students will work in groups to answer the guiding questions. Students will analyze both Mendieta's and Faustine's photographs to see how the artists made connections to places important to their histories but in different ways.

Students will then brainstorm places that are important to their personal histories, such as their homes, a family member's home, their parent's place of work or the hospital where they were born. Students will then consider the ways in which they interact with these places. Why are they important to them? How could they acknowledge these places in a work of art?



Guiding Questions

- Why is it important to acknowledge a place's past?
- In what ways is Faustine's work similar to Mendieta's?

PRIYA KAMBLI

The Artist

Priya Kampli juxtaposes images of her family with personal artifacts as a way to reconcile the cultural differences she experiences as an Indian living in the United States. Placing flower petals, spices and rice in intricate patterns over her family's photographs act as a dialogue between her and her ancestors.

The Artwork

This image is part of series entitled *Kitchen Gods*. Kampli's parents both passed away when she was young and as a result she feels compelled to go through her family's photographs. Her mother had altered the photographs through punctures and Kampli mimics this act with other materials to modify the photograph's story.

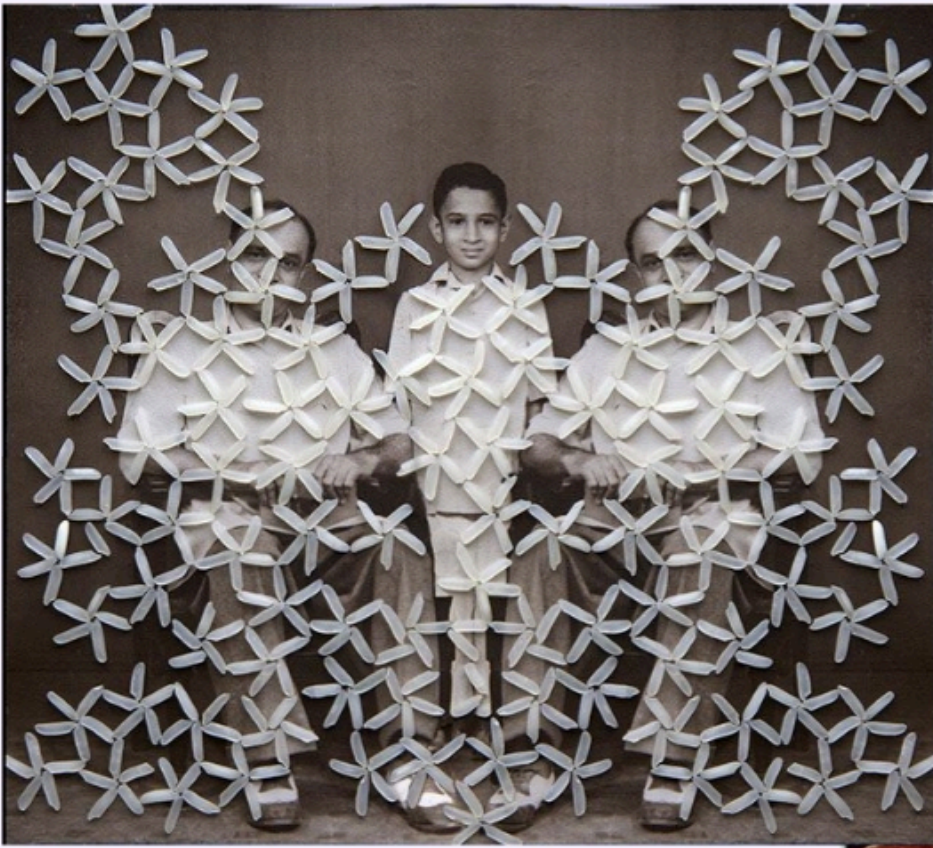


"One of my most startling early childhood memories is of finding one of my father's painstakingly composed family photographs pierced by my mother. She cut holes in them so as to completely obliterate her own face while not harming the image of my sister and myself beside her."



Priya Kampli, *Dada Aajooba*, 2017

ACTIVITY



Priya Kambli, *Mama and Dada Aajooba*, 2012

Priya Kambli, *Muma, Sona and Me (pierced by my mother)*, c-print photograph, 1979



Art Activity

Students will analyze the materials Kambli uses to abstract her family photographs. Then as a class students will consider why Kambli chose the materials she did. Students will then bring in a family photograph and select materials to impose over the photograph. An artist statement could then be made by each student to accompany their piece. The artist statement give students the opportunity to explain their choice in photograph and materials but also speak about the pattern they created on the surface and whether or not they decided to make the pattern permanent. Will they place the objects on the photos temporary or adhere them to the photo's surface?



Looking Questions

- What areas of the photo has been obstructed? What areas have not?
- What materials is the artist using on these photographs? Why might they have been chosen? Do you think they are meaningful to the artist?

REBECCA BELMORE

The Artist

Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, works with multiple disciplines to create political works centered on the realities of indigenous communities. Belmore makes connections between the body, land and language in her work to celebrate her culture.

The Artwork

Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose was exhibited at the Land/Spirit/Power exhibition of contemporary Native art held on the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas at the National Gallery of Canada. Belmore's piece was made of plywood painted as a linoleum/forest floor and each chair was taken from women she was close to. The headphones play women sharing their experiences as Native women in Canada. The installation allows Belmore to discuss stereotyping and racism towards native people by using the oral tradition of her community.



"Part of my interest in making art is to provoke a viewer to think about certain issues. And I do that through creating images that may, on first sight appear to be – hopefully!- beautiful. But when you look closer you may see something that's a little out of sync with that beauty. That's where I hope to get people to think about the image they're looking at."



Rebecca Belmore, *Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose*, 1992, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON, Installation



A detail shot of the installation of the floor painted to look like linoleum and the forest floor.

Historical Context

There are over 4,000 missing indigenous women in Canada. Indigenous women are three times more likely to be killed by a stranger and make up 10% of all female murders while making up only 3% of the population. With the arrival of Columbus in the Americas an estimated 55 million indigenous people died from violence and disease.

Nearly 90% of the population. Belmore's piece not only gives marginalized voices a platform to tell their stories, she is also stating that indigenous communities have survived. Their traditions live on and are not a thing of the past.

Rebecca Belmore,
Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose, 1992 ,
National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa, ON, Installation

ACTIVITY

Students will write a story about their community. Some prompts for students could include a community event, a time when they used a resource in their community, or how the community fundraised or collected resources for others.



Looking Questions

- What makes this installation inviting?
- Do you think the act of telling stories can be healing or empowering for the teller?



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