2021 TRIENNIAL: SOFT WATER HARD STONE

About this Guide

This guide offers four inquiry-based lesson plans with images, information, questions for close looking and interpretation of works of art, and an art making activity for experiential learning. The plans each focus on art by one of the 40 artists in “2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone.” The New Museum Triennial is the only recurring international exhibition in New York City devoted to emerging artists from around the world. The artists selected for the guide incorporate found manufactured and/or organic materials in their work. They each uniquely consider themes of permanence and impermanence, resistance, and transformation in relation to collective and personal histories across geographic borders, time, and ecological networks.

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Lessons plans are created with 6-12th grade students in the United States in mind, but may be adapted across age, grade, geography, and developmental readiness with shifts in vocabularies, art-making mediums, and the thematic emphasis educators choose to employ. For similar activities designed for young children working with teachers or caregivers, see the New Museum Kids Menu.

Each Lesson Plan offers:

- **Learning Objectives:** some of the critical thinking and experiential learning goals that students will practice and demonstrate through the activities in each lesson.
- **Background:** A brief text is included to introduce artworks with quotes from the artist.
- **Key Words:** Words and terms with simple definitions as they apply to their usage in the lesson plan to support accessibility and introduce new vocabulary and concepts.
- **Warm Up Questions:** These questions introduce key concepts and can be used for class or small group discussion or independent journaling.
- **Images and Discussion Questions:** Images of three works by each artist which are paired with quotes of each artist excerpted from the exhibition catalogue and discussion questions. Each page can be shared with students for independent work or learning together in small groups or a class,
- **Art Making Procedure:** Art making plans are inspired by each artist’s artwork and are designed to consider minimal availability of art-making supplies as well as remote or classroom learning. Lessons can be adapted for teachers and students working across materials and or digitally.
- **Reflection Questions:** These questions are designed for small group or class discussion, journaling, or a worksheet of writing prompts.

About the New Museum Exhibition “2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone”

The 2021 Triennial features work by 40 artists and collectives from around the world. The title, “Soft Water Hard Stone,” derives from a well-known proverb in Brazil, *Água mole em pedra dura, tanto bate até que fura* (Soft water on hard stone hits until it bores a hole). Similar proverbs exist in many cultures with multiple, nuanced interpretations. While researching artists and their work in 2019, the co-curators were introduced to the quote by artist Gabriela Mureb. As they continued visiting artists working in diverse contexts, the curators found two of the proverb’s meanings as described by Mureb resonated and emerged as a framework for understanding connections amongst them: 1) if one persists long enough, one can achieve a desired effect or pursuit, and 2) time can destroy even the most seemingly solid and impenetrable materials. From the curators’ introductory text:
In this moment of profound change, where structures that were once thought to be stable are disintegrating or on the edge of collapse, the 2021 Triennial recognizes artists re-envisioning traditional models, materials, and techniques beyond established paradigms. Their works exalt states of transformation, calling attention to the malleability of structures, porous and unstable surfaces, and the fluid and adaptable potential of both technological and organic mediums. Throughout the exhibition, artists address the regenerative potential of the natural world and our inseparable relationship to it, and grapple with entrenched legacies of colonialism, displacement, and violence. Their works look back at overlooked histories and artistic traditions, while at the same time look forward toward the creative potential that might give dysfunctional or discarded remains new life. It is through their reconfigurations and reimaginings that we are reminded of not only our temporality, but also our adaptability—fundamental characteristics we share, and that keep us human.

The exhibition is curated by Margot Norton, Allen and Lola Goldring Curator at the New Museum, and Jamillah James, Senior Curator, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) with participation by Curatorial Fellow, Jeanette Bisschops.

Additional Resources:

- Exhibition Page with full introductory text
- Programs for Educators
- Exhibition Texts and Labels
- Recorded Panel Discussions with Artists and Curators
- Recent Press:
  * New York Times, Review, "Critic’s Pick: New Museum Triennial Explores the Hidden Strengths of Soft Power: A grab bag of forms and styles, the 2021 Triennial is that rare thing, a big contemporary survey with a cohesive mood" (link to print version)
  * Interview magazine, Feature, "Get to Know 5 Rising Art Stars From the New Museum Triennial" (link to print version)
  * Cultured magazine, Review, "The New Museum 2021 Triennial Seeks Meaning at the End of the World"
Nickola Pottinger: Layered Relief Sculptures

Learning Objectives

1. Students will observe how materials are used, discarded, recycled, and reused by identifying furniture, clothing, and objects in their neighborhoods, observing the life cycle of these objects, and imagining how they might be reused in the future.
2. Students will create a relief sculpture from discarded materials, emphasizing layering and creative reuse.
3. Students will interpret how materials, processes, images, and language can convey personal and cultural narratives in their own artworks, taking inspiration from Pottinger's incorporation of childhood memories and Jamaican proverbs.

Warm Up Questions

1. What is your relationship to objects when you finish using them? Do you throw them away? Do you separate recycling from trash at home, or at school? Do you or someone at home set aside clothing, furniture or books to be donated?
2. Do you like holding on to things that no longer function as originally intended, collecting or re-using them, or do you discard them? Do you find that the items you discard or keep hold memories or a sense of a past time and place?
3. Have you made sculptures before? What kinds of materials did you use? How might using discarded objects and materials change how you make art?
4. Are there any phrases, quotes, sayings or proverbs you think of when you need comfort or encouragement?
5. How can visual symbols, images, and language evoke memories of people or traditions from a specific place and time?

Background

Nickola Pottinger (b. 1986, Kingston, Jamaica; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY) is an artist who manipulates discarded objects, cardboard, and papers to create irregularly shaped wall reliefs, some of which are included in the 2021 New Museum Triennial. Taking advantage of time and materials found at home during the pandemic, Pottinger began using large storage boxes from a local food co-op, shredded mail, and papers to make paper pulp, which she shaped by hand into wall-hung relief sculptures. After molding the pulp, Pottinger often incorporates found material like broken pottery and egg shells. She then draws with pigment and oil pastels onto the heavily textured surfaces. The graphic compositions sometimes reference memories of Jamaica, her home country. Missing Jamaica, and not able to visit during the pandemic, Pottinger titled some of her artworks with parts of proverbs in Jamaican patois, but the meanings and interpretations of her use of imagery and language are mysterious, personal, and not easily identifiable. In her words:

“This past year, I’d never felt so far away from home. Every time I go to Jamaica, I feel restored and rejuvenated, and this last year was super hard. I was finding comfort in making these reliefs, and spending time with my family, who live fifteen minutes away in Brooklyn, and hearing their stories and accent.... Speaking with family here and abroad and hearing stories I hadn’t heard before at thirty-five years old felt fresh to me and emerged in this work. These marks and figures are intimate recordings.”

– Nickola Pottinger; all quotes are from the “Soft Water Hard Stone” exhibition catalogue.
Key Words

**Relief Sculpture:** The term *relief* is from the Latin verb *relevo*, to raise. To carve a sculpture in relief is to give the impression that the sculpted material has been raised above the background surface. Relief sculpture has qualities drawn from both two-dimensional arts like drawing and painting, and three-dimensional sculpture. Relief sculpture artwork both hangs on and projects from the wall, or another type of flat background surface.

**Patois:** a regional dialect containing aspects of formal written and spoken language as well as introducing changes or idiosyncrasies. Jamaican Patois is spoken by the majority of Jamaicans as a native language and is similarly used by many people of the Jamaican diaspora. It is also used in literature and music.

**Proverb:** a short statement or quote containing wisdom or advice, often referencing a culture’s traditions, superstitions, and/or beliefs. Proverbs often invoke specific imagery, and can be translated into images in an artwork.

**Asymmetry:** an artwork or object that has an irregular shape: the top-bottom and left-right are not mirror images. Pottinger embraces a lack of symmetry in her paper relief sculptures.

**Negative space:** the space around, between, or through objects and materials, or objects in an image. (sometimes described as “breathing room.”) Positive space is the space taken up by the material and objects

**Paper pulp:** fibrous material prepared by chemically or mechanically separating cellulose fibers from wood, fiber crops, waste paper, or rags. Pottinger uses waste paper.

Images and Discussion Questions

Discuss the following selection of reliefs by Pottinger, focusing on her expansive use of materials and the ways her process, symbols, drawn imagery, and titles intersect to convey memories of a specific time, culture, and place:

“This last year working from home during the pandemic, I was able to play more in a sculpture realm, making my own paper pulp from collected cardboard boxes, shredded mail, and papers I had around. I was molding these shapes and making more tactile surfaces and textures. This layering was always important, even in my drawing process with oil pastels and collaging to build up surface.” -Nickola Pottinger

1. Caan cut it off an thro it weh comes from a Jamaican proverb, loosely translated to mean: do not cast out your family members, even if they get into trouble. How does the title for this piece influence your understanding of the marks and overall shape or design?

2. Pottinger describes the marks and figures on her works as intimate recordings. How would you describe the markings on caan cut if off an thro it weh?

3. Do you think the marks and figures have symbolic meanings, or are they more abstract?

4. What memories might you reference in your own relief sculptures? Will you make them clear or mysterious? How does this artwork play with positive and negative space?
“It was nice to have my physical hand to create the ground itself and use my fingers to draw on the surface, which I’m doing with my most recent works like the mek moon meditation, 2021. It felt right. I’d been separated from my drawings in the studio for months and I never referenced them when I was making these new works. It felt strange to go back to my studio after months and see that there was a direct correlation. They looked like magnified versions of small sections of my larger drawings.” -Nickola Pottinger

1. Where do you see evidence of the artist’s hand and physical art-making process in this work? How might the artist have made the marks and textures? How do seeing these handmade qualities add to your understanding of this artwork as a personal recording of memories or longing?

2. Does separating the artwork into sections, and two somewhat symmetrical shapes, influence your understanding of or response to this piece?

3. “Mek” means “make” and mediation is something people do as a healing and/or spiritual practice. What associations do you have with the moon and meditation? How do you think the moon and meditation might relate to this work?

4. How can you take inspiration from Pottinger’s transformation of materials to give found and discarded materials a new physical form and set of meanings?

“A lot of these shapes often subconsciously reference letters, or extensions of the body. I’ll arrive at a shape, break it, rearrange it, and work on it again. I think it’s important not to know the end result and to accept spontaneity. It’s also important that nothing is symmetrical. I like them to be awkward. It takes me a long time to think about the shape, but the rest comes more naturally. I’m drawn to anything with rounded corners. They come from multiple image references—perhaps something I see in a museum, a brick on the sidewalk, my dog lying down sleeping. Then I’ll often change it in the process; it’s not direct.” -Nickola Pottinger

1. How does the shape of this piece differ from the other artworks by Pottinger you’ve viewed?

2. How would you describe the edges of the sculpture? How does the framing of the central figure impact your interpretation?

3. If you were the figure in this painting, what story would you tell based on the visual information?
Art Making
Layered Relief Sculptures

Students will make a relief sculpture with found and discarded objects. Starting with a memory, saying or proverb, students will then considering asymmetry, positive and negative space, and material exploration to identify and visually translate their chosen topic.

Materials
- A large and sturdy sheet of cardboard to use as a background surface (can be a deconstructed box). If finding or collecting larger cardboard sheets is an issue, students might combine several smaller, flat pieces of cardboard to make their work of art.
- Discarded recycales papers (mail, newspapers, magazines) and/or cardboard, plastic, and other small objects, for instance books, small pieces of furniture, pieces of wood or metal (avoid sharp, heavily rusted, or splintered surfaces; look for objects that are safe to touch and use)
- Glue, tape, hot glue, and/or needle and thread for attaching and assembling materials
- Scissors and/or utility knife with self-healing cutting mat, or another art making surface that it is ok to damage.
- Choose supplies as avaialble: drawing (oil pastels, pencils, and/or colored pencils) and/or painting (brushes, acrylic, tempera or watercolor paint, containers for water to rinse brushes)
- Optional: beads, buttons, fabric, yarn, lace, and other materials to add texture

Art Making Procedure (2–4 45-minute classes)
1. After a discussion of Pottinger’s work and the idea of relief sculptures, supply students with cardboard for a background surface, or have them choose a selection from various sizes. Ask students to think about the shape of their background and begin to sketch it. Will they cut negative space into it, and or shape the outside edges with curved, irregular, or straight lines?
2. Give students a week to collect discarded materials from home, their neighborhoods, and/or the school building to make several smaller reliefs that may be combined, or one larger work.
3. As students continue to collect materials, have them collect fragments of language with meaning for them. These language fragments may come from a memory, quote, song, proverb, or saying that might serve as a catalyst for their artwork.
4. Students might want to journal or sketch about the meaning of their quote or proverb. They might also research culturally-specific symbols associated with their memory of a time and place, proverb, or quote for inspiration.
5. In the next class, ask students to experiment with arranging objects and materials in different configurations. Do they need to change the shape of the sketch on their cardboard, or are they ready to cut it out?
6. Ask students to cut the shape of the background using scissors, their hands, or a utility knife. Share and enforce best practices for safety.
7. Students arrange their collected materials again and attach them. Encourage creative methods of attaching objects, like glue, hot glue, tape, sewing, or other methods.
8. As students continue to consider the way materials, process, titles, and images come together to create meaning, encourage them to think about the surface texture of the piece. How might discarded papers or flexible cardboard be crumpled, or folded to create different textures?
9. In the same class, or the next, ask students to continue working on the surface of their relief and add paint and/or drawing media to add another layer. How might color unify or emphasize
Nickola Pottinger / Layered Relief Sculptures

various elements, create symbols, or express energy with different marks and gestures?
10. Ask students to title their piece with language they collected, fragmented, combined, or otherwise transformed.

Wrap Up: To conclude the chosen activities, students share their relief sculptures either in small groups or whole group conversations.

Reflection:
Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheets, or journaling:

1. Did the process of collecting and re-using papers and discarded objects found on the street, at home, or in school change the way you view everyday objects? How do we decide what we keep versus what we throw away?

2. What new techniques and materials did you use? How would you describe the process of using them?

3. How did thinking about a memory, proverb, song, or quote influence your process? Did you look for materials related to your memory or quote, or did you think of a memory in response to materials you collected? How might you use memory or a cultural reference as a starting point for your art in the future?

4. Did working in this way feel more like creating a picture (such as drawing), a sculpture, or both?

5. Pottinger sometimes uses the word “relief” to describe both the sculptural forms of her work and also the meditative and healing process of making it. How did it feel to experiment with materials, language, and memory that can mean more than one thing at a time?
Jeneen Frei Njootli: How to be In/visible

Objectives

1. Students will identify how Jeneen Frei Njootli navigates and makes use of legibility and illegibility in their art, and interpret how these aesthetic decisions work to resist reductive interpretations and expectations of the artist’s gender and indigenous identity and cultural history.

2. Students will identify how the artist makes use of time-based and performance practices to question and disrupt restrictive structures, while expressing ideas absence and presence within them.

3. Students will reflect on times they wish to be seen and understood and times they wish to be less visible, and less misunderstood. Students will consider how these times might relate to systems of power, assumptions, and expectations of who they are or are supposed to be, as they move through different physical and social spaces.

4. Students will create artwork in which they consider how to include the presence of material referring to their experiences, without making a fixed, representational portrait of themselves.

5. Students will analyze how an artwork can reflect complexities, impermanence, and changing aspects of personal or shared histories.

Warm Up Questions

Ask students to journal their reflections on the following questions, perhaps sharing your own personal examples. Invite, but do not require students to share their reflections.

1. Are there times and places you want to take up space and be heard and seen? If so, how do you show up?

2. Are their times and places you wish to be less visible and quiet? If so, how are you present?

3. What factors change these feelings, choices, and behaviors? Who are you with? How do you feel physically? What is the time of day, or season? What kind of physical or social space are you inhabiting (home; neighborhoods and places where you work, live or go to school; a religious space; a friend’s or relative’s home; public transportation; stores).

4. How do you feel doing specific activities out of school compared to in school? Do you ever feel that you are being watched with judgements, assumptions, and expectations? How do perceptions of how others view you impact your behavior?

Background

Jeneen Frei Njootli (Vuntut Gwitchin), (b. 1988, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada; lives and works in Vancouver, Canada) is an artist who works across sound, performance, sculpture and installation. Their work fills spaces and disrupts boundaries. Frei Njootli has stated that they seek to contemplate the absence, presence, and commodification of Indigenous bodies and labor, particularly of femme-appearing people. Their work resists direct representation of their body. Instead, they employ modes of abstraction in sound, sculpture, performance, and photography that disconnect the viewer from a specific body or source in favor of something more amorphous or difficult to contain. In each gesture, Frei Njootli is testing the limits of visibility and asserting control over their self-image. (continues)
Permeating and disrupting borders is inherent to their work, both as a member of the Gwich’in people (who span two colonial borders, the U.S.-Canada border and the Yukon-NWT border), and as a gender queer person using they/them pronouns. Fighting for the title not to be pending (2020) is composed of the artist’s weight in beads and can be found in various cracks and corners throughout the New Museum in the 2021 Triennial exhibition “Sift Water Hard Stone”. As the beads in Fighting for the title not to be pending roll outside their original locations, even landing inside visitors’ shoes, they subtly cross boundaries, as though filling in for the artist’s body and creating a performance. The material moves similarly to how Frei Njootli describes their performance work with sound:

"With performance, there is a felt shift that happens in a room when a performance begins, and this tension and attention. Sound can permeate spaces and bodies in a way that other mediums can’t. It’s rascally in that way, it seeps, and bleeds, and can be challenging to contain. Some people find my performances painful...acoustically and viscerally to endure, and they have to leave. And other people are elated afterwards." -Jeneen Frei Njootli; all quotes from “Soft Water Hard Stone” exhibition catalogue

Key Words
Performance: art that uses the human body and the element of time as visual and storytelling elements, often incorporating physical media and materials, including but not limited to sculpture and installation

Legible: easy to understand, read, interpret, or decipher; illegible is the opposite – obscured, or not easily read.

Ephemeral: short-lived; time-based and impermanent

Installation: art composed of media that has been assembled and designed to fit in a specific space and context

Cultural significance - aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations.

Figurative - depicting recognizable objects, figures, or scenes

Abstract - not concrete or practical; theoretical; difficult to understand; expressing ideas and emotions in art by using elements such as form, colors, and lines without attempting to create a realistic picture.

Images and Discussion Questions
Discuss the ways in which three works by Jeneen Frei Njootli make use of presence and absence, legibility and obscurity, and ephemeral qualities, and how this work relates to identity and cultural history without direct representation or figurative self-portraiture.
Jeneen Frei Njootli, Fighting for the Title Not to be Pending, 2020

“… Fighting for The Title Not to be Pending (2020) which is comprised of my body weight in beads, that are distributed on to the ground outside the gallery [and inside the New Museum for the Triennial]. Having that many beads, for some people it’s a form of wealth. But it’s also a form of carelessness on my part. Traditionally, for Gwich’in people it’s important to take care of our beads…In some ways by summoning my body in this space of dispersal, I'm thinking about the legibility and illegibility of Indigenous peoples in relationship to land, and in relationship to the forms of labor that get invisible-ized, or that are made or rendered not visible from us. I'm thinking about presence and absence.” -Jeneen Frei Njootli

1. Are you able to get a sense of the artist’s presence through this ephemeral collection of beads? How will the piece become more or less legible, when the beads disperse over time?

2. Can data or symbols tell a whole story of a person or culture? How does the artist decide what they want people to focus on in their work? What is different when you focus specifically on a portion of a story, and how does this impact understanding?

3. What is the impact of the beads’ dispersal? How might the dispersal relate to political, social, and geographic borders? If the beads rolled into your shoe, or you felt them under your feet, how would that feel?

4. Museums have long histories of displaying cultural belongings, such as beadwork, and images of Indigenous people. Often, white settlers violently stole and acquired this work without consent to entertain, or to explain cultures and people to white audiences (through a colonial lens of power and supremacy). How does Njootli’s work differ from this history of collection, display, and explanation?
“The presence and absence of a body is a thread that runs throughout my work. Sometimes I wonder if I'm erasing myself.” – Jeneen Frei Njootli

_Ache_ (2019) joins two concrete-dredged parkas, which are trimmed with wolf fur and leather fringe at the sleeves. Suspended from a black metal rod, the work appears like a blanched, ghostly figure in space.

1. How does the artist’s transformation of a clothing item into a sculpture relate to the presence and absence of a body?

2. How would you feel encountering this work in person? How does this work compare or contrast with the intervention of the beads?

3. What associations do you have with the materials? How do you think they are collected and used to create this sculpture? What connections might the materials of this work have with permanence or impermanence, and relationships to land?
"I was thinking about how people consume Indigenous material culture, wondering how can we monumentalize beadwork. I wanted to have beadwork be so loud that people have a visceral response and need to leave the room. I want people to value our material culture more than is expected at truck stops and dollar stores. Asking people to look in a different way.

“I am seasonally white passing, and I’m also very privileged, and able bodied. What does it mean when images of my body become the work? The way that I have crafted my practice is that it doesn’t lean on that consumption. Instead, I want to permeate people with sound and ephemera.” -Jeneen Frei Njootli

To watch this video, visit this link on the New Museum website.

1. What do you notice about how the artist frames their body in the video? Do they make their full face and body visible? What are we asked to focus on, and what is held back? What do you think of their shadow while jumping the braided beaded rope? Is this shadow also part of the work; what effect does it have?

2. What effect does repetition have on the way you receive this video compared to videos of people we typically see online or in other media? How does the repetition make you feel (for example, do you feel stuck in a loop, or lulled by its rhythm)?

3. What role does sound play in this performance? How does it influence your understanding of the video and the artist’s self-representation, visibility, and invisibility?
Art Making
How to be in/visible

Materials
- Journal, notebook, or sketchbook; writing and drawing implements to brainstorm performance and installation ideas

Depending upon the selected prompts and available materials and equipment, students might need:

- Culturally significant or referential objects to arrange or disperse in a space. Students should be encouraged to be resourceful, looking at seemingly mundane material of even the smallest scale that makes up their everyday life.
- Some students may wish to use materials from home that are unique and cherished, such as personal items and significant familial, cultural, and spiritual belongings. If so, encourage them to reflect on how they wish to care and treat such materials in their artwork as they make decisions. They may wish to use photos and photocopies of them to incorporate, share, or disperse the ideas they wish to convey.
- Camera, camera phone, or laptop camera for recording
- Art and school supplies, from drawing media, paper, and clay to envelopes, paperclips, pencils, rulers; supplies can be used to create something, or be considered as referential material with significant number or arrangements.
- Dry foods such as grains, pasta, beans, candy; or detritus of food, such as wrappers and packaging.
- Clothing or accessories such as earrings, hair fasteners, shoes, shoelaces, hats, or mittens that can stand in for the body.
- Organic materials found from a site that is significant to a daily routine, or where a special activity takes place.

Art Making Procedure (3 or more classes)
Day 1 Journaling and discussing Janeen Frei Njootli’s work with the preceding material
Day 2
1. After discussing Janeen Frei Njootli’s work, ask students to return to the warm up questions, reflect, and add to their journals if they wish.
2. Ask students to make an artwork that includes both the presence and absence of aspects of themselves and their experiences. How can you be present and even fill space with a work of art, without being fully viewed or represented?
3. Ask students to consider what might they want to share and what might they want to obscure to suggest the complexity of who they are and what they experience.
4. You may wish to share additional artists’ work as examples, such as Ana Mendieta’s Siluetas, an influence of Janeen Frei Njootli. Other examples: Adrian Piper’s dispersal of calling cards with text that do not record her encounters, but exist as part of them and a trace; Felix Gonzalez Torres’s use of candy or stacks of printed paper that deplete and disperse as people take them; or Nari Ward’s Canned Smiles that involve an intimate encounter and concealment, while raising critical questions about how racial stereotypes of identities are packaged and commodified.
5. Ask students to consider and choose from some of the following prompts and methods, or come up with a new one that engages the following ideas: presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, legibility and obscurity. Ask students to draft and sketch their plans and ideas. Ask
them to notice and collect materials and/or recordings from their time outside of class, or in school, that they wish to use.

- Make a video that only reveals aspects of your body, such as hands or feet engaged with a place and/or materials. How will you express your relationship to place, materials, or time, through gestures, sound, and editing? Think about spaces and/or situations in which you want to be seen, and times where you want to be less visible or completely invisible. How can you represent these experiences through performance, or in editing and framing what you want people to focus on in a video of photograph? What physical gestures, light and shadows, sounds, and props can you use?

- Make a piece that includes dispersal. Consider ephemera like mail art or printed fliers or cards. What would be like to give everyone in the class a different or similar message in the form of drawings, photos, or fragmented poetry to take away with them?

- Consider data related to an aspect of your changing experience of being in the world such as age or height or a distance traveled – is there a way to represent what those years, miles, or inches mean to you through a number of objects that represent something to you (food, craft materials, discarded wrappers or containers, school supplies, or material collected from an outdoor space like pebbles, sand, leaves, sticks)? Assemble, arrange, or disperse these materials for an installation. If you choose to make an ephemeral installation outdoors, take a picture or make a video to share it.

- Use clothing, accessories, or other personally or culturally significant material as a stand-in for your body in an installation or video. How do you want people to encounter it: looking from above or below, inside or outside, full view or obscured? How will you arrange the items, and what mood might this arrangement express?

Wrap Up

Day 3 Students share their work with the class: arrange, perform, disperse, or screen recordings to present their art. Ask students to share what they notice and experience in their classmates’ work and what questions the work leaves unanswered.

Reflection

Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheets, or journaling:

1. Did you discover anything new about your embodied experiences moving through different spaces through this artmaking exercise?

2. How did you select a space for your installation or performance? Did your relationship to the space change once it became a site for artmaking?

3. Do you feel you hit a balance of what you wanted to be legible and obscured in your work? Visible and invisible? Present and absent?

4. How did making this art relate boundaries, categories, or notions of a being a particular type of person? Was the process challenging and/or inspiring?
Kang Seung Lee: Drawn into Memory

Learning Objectives

a. Students will observe and discuss Kang Seung Lee’s art and identify how he uses commemoration to build a sense of community across time and geography.

b. Students will analyze how choices of subjects, materials, artistic elements (such as scale, color, and composition) and methods, can communicate themes such as memory, connection, absence, and presence.

c. Students will create detailed drawings, rubbings, or photographs of objects related to presence and loss, through either a) person they know and miss, or a public or historic figure to whom they feel connected, or b) a place they feel connected to that is out of reach, gone, or changed.

d. Students will present their work with each other and reflect, through journaling and discussion, on how this process compares to other forms of preserving memory and history, such as archives and public records.

Warm Up Questions

1. How or where do you usually see the story or image of a public figure remembered after they die? How do these remembrances and commemorations make you feel?

2. When you miss a person or place, how do you find comfort? Have you ever made art to commemorate who or what you miss?

3. Do you ever feel connected to memories and histories of people you’ve never met, or places you’ve never been?

Background

Kang Seung Lee (b. 1978, Seoul, South Korea; lives and works in Los Angeles, California) is an artist who memorializes members of the queer community, including those who died as a result of the AIDS epidemic through installations. His installations include detailed drawings, embroideries, sculptures of plants, stones and other objects from places where they lived or congregated. Through the Garden series and other works, Lee creates an intergenerational and multilocational archive, linking queer artists and activists who never met yet lived during the same time in different countries. For instance, Lee is part of a community that cares for plants grown from cuttings of a cactus originally owned by Harvey Milk, a civil rights leader and one of the first openly gay elected officials in the U.S. Lee assembled an installation of writings, a diary, and other objects from Korean activist and writer Oh Joon-soo, convincing the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul to add the installation to its collection, thereby incorporating queer history into Korean history in a public exhibition space. To commemorate filmmaker and activist Derek Jarman and link him to Oh Joon-soo, Lee spent time at Jarman’s garden with the filmmaker’s last partner, Keith Collins. Lee began to think of the plants, which are from the same mother roots as Jarman’s original plants, as witnesses to history. Lee talks about how intergenerational care links historic figures who never met, and how he continues this care through his artmaking:

“In certain projects, including Garden, I talk about the Korean activist and writer Oh Joon-soo’s legacy, as well as Derek Jarman—two people who lived during similar times and who both died of AIDS-related complications, and were both activists in different countries, but who didn’t know one another. I'm trying to create this thread between their lives, which are connected through their resistance and activism against oppression and discrimination.[continues]
Their lives are connected through someone like me, who came after them, but is aware of their histories. Their memories are somehow connected through me, which is tied to the idea of intergenerational connection and care that I’m constantly trying to talk about through my work. I only got to learn about their stories through this intergenerational care—from those who wrote about their work, who cared about their lives, who cared about their activism.” – Kang Seung Lee; all quotes are from the “Soft Water Hard Stone” exhibition catalogue.

**Key Words**

- **commemorate**: to formally or informally recognize and show respect for a person or place. This can include celebrations as well as objects like portraits and commemorative plaques.

- **archive**: 1) a collection of objects, writings, and mementos that create a story and history for a person or place; 2) the act of collecting and safely storing objects and mementos representing a person or place

- **Ephemera**: written or printed items or memorabilia that were assumed to have a limited life span or frame of reference

**Images and Discussion Questions**

Discuss a selection of drawings by Lee in his installation in the New Museum 2021 Triennial, focusing on the detailed, labor-intensive renderings of objects memorializing gay icons who were lost while resisting discrimination, many losing their lives to AIDS, an epidemic that governments neglected to address.
**New Museum Educator Guide: “Soft Water Hard Stone”**
Kang Seung Lee/ Drawn into Memory

**Untitled (Pebble from Prospect Cottage), 2018**

![Image of Untitled (Pebble from Prospect Cottage), 2018](image)

**Kang Seung Lee, Untitled (Pebble from Prospect Cottage), 2018, Graphite on paper, 63 x 47 in (160 x 119 cm). Courtesy the artist and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.**

“Instead of looking at the erased as failure, I started to look at their lives from the perspective of pebbles, the perspective of the earth, the perspective of planetary time, and the fact that these memories are already there and are being remembered by other beings, like the plants and the pebbles.” – Kang Seung Lee

1. Lee talks about the absence or erasure of queer memories, histories, and people, creating detailed drawings to illuminate and connect to their importance and presence in lives and experiences today. How does the composition of this drawing indicate a tension between absence and presence? What has the artist omitted, and what is included?

2. How does the choice of a small pebble to memorialize someone compare to ways you have seen people commemorated? The pebble this drawing is based on is only a couple of inches wide. The drawing is 63 x 47 inches. How much bigger is the drawing than the original object? What is the effect of making the drawing this size?

3. As part of his practice of memorializing historic figures lost to AIDS, Lee spent time with Keith Collins, the former partner of activist and filmmaker, Derek Jarman, at their garden. What does the material choice of the pebble to remember Jarman and his family cottage and garden tell us about presence and absence over time?
“I’m not only talking about the absence of these people whom we lost to the AIDS epidemic but also their presence in our lives and in our memories. I’m bringing in the stories of these individuals who are gone, as well as the loss and mourning in our collective memory, particularly within queer communities across continents and cultures. Ultimately, the blurring and removal of the bodies from these pictures are about their presence as well, and about how we can look at their erasure or death from a perspective of possibility and creating something, rather than looking at it as a loss.” – Kang Seung Lee

5. What do you notice about the figure in this drawing? What affect does the blurring have on your interpretation of the narrative in this scene? Would you describe the figure as absent, present, neither, or somewhere in between?

6. What do you notice about the site where the drawing takes place? What information can you gather that may also shed light on the person?

7. How does this drawing differ from Untitled (Pebble from Prospect Cottage) in its treatment of subject matter, detail, and contextual or background information?
“The story behind this cactus is that when Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician in California, was assassinated in 1978, a Christmas cactus was found amongst his belongings, which was passed to his ex-boyfriend. In 2018 [artist] Julie Tolentino received cuttings that were propagated from this mother plant that originally belonged to Milk. She named it Harvey and also gave it the title Archive in Dirt, thinking about this inherited knowledge and connection through the care given to this cactus. She showed the cactus as an artwork in 2019, and I’m fortunate to be part of the circle of friends who are now taking care of it. I made drawings of the cactus and a group of our friends recently split and repotted Julie’s plant, so there are now four different plants growing individually.” –Kang Seung Lee

1. Lee’s drawings in graphite are all in greyscale. Compare the drawing to the photograph of the plant in the installation. How do the colors of the plant in the installation and the greyscale drawing effect your interpretation of them?

2. Lee describes the cuttings from Milk’s plant as creating connections amongst friends and inherited knowledge through the care of the cactus. Lee also describes his detailed drawings as a form of labor. How are labor and care connected in this work? Can you see or interpret this process in any details?

3. How can the level of detail in this drawing inspire you to view the objects and images you collect in a new way? What tools or techniques can you use to represent them with a similar investment of care and labor?
Art Making
Focus on Kang Seung Lee: Drawn into Memory

Students will make close-up, detailed drawings, rubbings, or photographs of objects to remember a person or place they know or feel a connection to. This may include a public figure or place from any time and geography, with the option of assembling renderings, historic photographs, and objects into an installation.

Materials
- Letters, cards, postcards, photographs, notes and small objects from, related to, or reminiscent of a person or place the student wishes to commemorate
- Paper (for drawing or rubbings)
- Pencil, charcoal or ink
- A journal or sketchbook
- Optional: a device with a camera to photograph assembled mementos
- Optional: a site to install objects and renderings, possibly including the site one misses, if accessible

Art Making Procedure (2 or more class sessions)
1. Ask students to write in their journal about a person or place they feel connected to and want to commemorate. Students who like to draw might make sketches instead of writing notes and memories.
2. Once students have identified a person or place, ask them to look for photographs, objects, cards, or letters relating to the person or place. Students can bring these into school, or, if they are too precious, encourage them to take detailed photographs from different angles in lighting where they can see details. If they are commemorating someone who they do not know such as a public or historic figure, have them research and gather images and writings related to the person’s life from online sources, or books. Likewise, they may research and gather and print online or photocopied materials related to a place that is out of reach, if they choose.
3. Assist students with deciding whether to draw objects, or make rubbings or photographs emphasizing close-up, detailed views of the object. Encourage students to make multiple renderings of each object from which to later edit, and to embrace black and white or greyscale, similar to Lee’s graphite drawings. If students are using materials sourced from the internet or print, perhaps there is a detail — item of clothing, object in the space, aspect of a landscape or architecture, rather than a whole picture they would like to focus on drawing. How might they transform the image in other ways, such as scale, using color if the image was originally black and white, or conversely choosing greyscale, depending on how they wish to express absence and presence?
4. As students create detailed renderings, have them share these with classmates, discussing related memories. Classmates can contribute associations they might have with these same objects.
5. For students who would like to create a site-specific installation placing their drawing together with objects and ephemera, encourage them to assemble their renderings and original objects at home, school, or another location. If the installation is off-site, have the student photograph the installation to share with classmates.

Wrap Up: To conclude the activities, students share their renderings, objects, and/or installations, learning about places and people who are important to one another and how they chose to interpret this importance. Students should be encouraged to acknowledge each other’s memories, experiences of loss, care, and commemoration through active listening and respectful observation.

Reflection: Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheets, or journaling:

1. How did collecting or researching objects related to a person or place spark your memories? How did uncovering these memories contribute to the details you chose to focus on in your making?

2. Did you learn something new about your classmates, or the places and people they chose to remember? How does this experience of sharing each other’s artworks compare to encountering statues, plaques, obituaries, or social media tributes in your everyday life?

3. Kang Seung Lee describes making this work: “In several projects of mine, such as the graphite drawings and embroidery works, artistic labor is quite visible. In both cases, they have references to specific memories or histories. There’s always an image that’s a reference in my work, and in that sense, it’s literal embodiment—I’m trying to embody someone else’s story. I’m creating a lineage between that person and me through the process of this labor. There’s a space being created through the process of a craft. Often, people think of craft as the opposite of conceptual work, but in reality, craft is process, and labor creates this space for thinking.”

How did it feel to spend time making this work of art? Do you feel more connected to the person or place, and/or to others who appreciate that person or place?
Erin Jane Nelson: Material Networks

Learning Objectives

4. Students will develop close observation skills, interacting with the natural world and photographing often-overlooked details of plants, animals, or themselves.

5. Students will create an original assemblage: radiating from the photograph, students will use found natural and manufactured materials in their environments to represent a network and how it relates to social, physical, and emotional thriving and survival.

6. Students will reflect on their observations of the natural environment, relationships between plants, animals, and humans, and how these networks are affected by their local climate and climate change due to global warming. These reflections can take the form of class or small group discussions, or journaling in response to questions in the warm up and wrap up sections.

Warm Up Questions

1. What kinds of changes to your skin, hair, attitude, mood, overall health, and well-being do you notice in relation to weather, seasonal, and climate changes?

2. If you have pets or spend time with animals, what do changes to their skin, hair, or eyes signal about their health and relationships to other living creatures? Do these changes reflect interactions with changes in the climate, weather, and environment?

3. What are some examples of living networks in nature? For example, some trees use the mycelium (a network of fibers similar to a root system) of fungi to communicate with other trees, sharing water and other resources. This type of communication system can be especially helpful as seasons change, and as the characteristics we associate with seasons shift because of climate change. What changes do you notice in the ways plants, animals, and/or humans interact as seasons or weather changes, or when there is extreme or unexpected weather? Have you ever noticed for example, if you, a plant, or a pet need water at the same time during a heatwave? How might noticing or caring for plants and animals attune you to coming storms, heat, cold, rain, drought, shade and sun even if you have different needs? How might you care for each other's needs?

4. How do changes to weather and season affect your physical and emotional well-being?

Background

Erin Jane Nelson (b. 1989, Neenah, WI, United States; lives and works in Atlanta, GA) Nelson is an artist whose large-scale wall sculptures, created for the New Museum 2021 Triennial, wrestle with anxiety with climate change. The sculptures are composed of hand-built ceramics that incorporate collected organic materials as well as found and archival photographs. Nelson’s imaginative approach allows her to rethink how we exist “in relationship to the land, to a community, to a system.” Rather than create a scientific document to represent systems and environmental decay, Nelson thinks in terms of nurturing relationships and adaptation, and is drawn to clay as a container to hold space for something “vital, living, useful, tender, valuable.” Combining the visual languages of craft and photography, Nelson’s objects foreground overarching concerns about the climate crisis, particularly its impact on the Gulf Coast, and the area’s shifting sociocultural landscape. Nelson’s use of organic materials from the region—clay, pigments, and natural elements—combined with the tactility of the works—built by hand and slowly developed over time—ground the artist’s broad concerns in physical objects.
“…When I’m thinking about care, fertility, or nurturing, what I’m trying to do is move past a place of grief and paralysis about climate collapse and into a space where I’m imaging new forms of existing in relationship to the land, to a community, and to a system. The way that I’m doing that is through something that feels very abstract and dislocated from community and place, but that comes from a desire to generate or build a new space that can contain a lot of anxiety and self-accountability, a container that can hold the complicated feeling of being a person in the world, however utterly fraught that world is. Loving something as silly as a piece of clay, which is basically a piece of ground, to me comes from a place of wonder and wanting to create and hold space for something that we don’t always think of as vital, living, useful, tender, valuable.” – Erin Jane Nelson, all quotes are from the “Soft Water Hard Stone” Exhibition Catalogue.

**Key Words**

**Network**: a group or system of interconnected people, organisms or things

**Ceramics**: 1) objects made from hardened clay; 2) the process of shaping clay into a form, vessel, sculpture or structure, which is fired or hardens and is often glazed or painted. Nelson says about the process of ceramics: “You’re simultaneously taking something that’s a liquid and building it up into something solid, but then you’re also very much carving back into it and reducing it again when it’s fired and hardening.”

**Mixed media**: artwork made from combining different types of processes and materials

**Assemblage**: artwork made from found, discarded and/or recycled materials, including natural and manmade objects

**Climate change**: changes to global and/or regional climate (weather conditions over time in a given region), including rising temperatures, attributed to the rise of atmospheric carbon dioxide from human reliance on fossil fuels (global warming). This lesson plan looks at the adaptation’s humans, plants and animals make in response to symptoms of climate change, including extreme weather, and changes in the characteristics of seasons. Some of these adaptations involve individual behaviors and habits, while others are changes in how different species interact.

**Images and Discussion Questions**

Discuss the following selection of sculptures by Nelson, focusing on her abstract forms, layering of materials, and attention to surfaces as a way to tune into and re-imagine relationships with communities and land.


“I came into making ceramics by thinking of it as a container for a photographic or a documentary practice, as the substrate for a collage. I haven’t ever really understood the forms though, where they come from, or what they’re meant to suggest—the linkages between them and the photographs feel tender and abstract and have many different reference points for viewers. On one hand, they’re like cells dividing, and on the other they’re like countries on a map. I like the space that exists between interpretations, and that’s a space that was really difficult to find with photography at a certain point.” - Erin Jane Nelson

5. Describe the surface, materials, colors, forms, and imagery you notice. Do these details remind you of anything else you have encountered previously?

6. Nelson describes her sculptures as abstract, while also referencing cells dividing or countries on a map. How do these ideas, and the title, play into your interpretation of this artwork? How might this work reflect Nelson’s interest in climate change?

7. How does Nelson communicate her search for connections to the organisms that live with us, like the networks of microorganisms living on our skin and in our bodies? Why might it be important to consider these organisms? How do these organisms relate to our own wellbeing?
Erin Jane Nelson, *Freezing my eggs on a melting planet*, 2021

“...as a woman in my thirties, instead of thinking about fertility and nurturing in terms of creating a human baby, I’ve been thinking instead about how to apply that energy to alternative forms of care. Instead of traditional reproduction, can I apply that innate force to restoring soil or growing plants, inoculating fungal cultures, or making ceramic sculptures that feel unnerving to me? When I’m thinking about care, fertility, or nurturing, what I’m trying to do is move past a place of grief and paralysis about climate collapse and into a space where I’m imaging new forms of existing in relationship to the land, to a community, and to a system.” - Erin Jane Nelson

1. How does Nelson’s care and concern for the environment come through in this artwork? What images, surfaces, shapes, or feelings do you see or experience that communicate a desire to nurture materials and reverse some of the damage from climate change?

2. The physical form of this sculpture differs from others we’ve viewed in that it includes separate shapes. Where else in this artwork do you see evidence of Nelson “imagining new forms in relation to the land, to a community...?”

3. How can your own artwork provide an opportunity for you to imagine new forms to reflect new habits in response to long-term seasonal and climatic changes?
Erin Jane Nelson/ Networked Materials

Erin Jane Nelson, Pollinator’s Dilemma, 2021


[See detail image on next page]

“In sculpture, things are either additive or subtractive. You’re either building something up or you’re carving something down. Ceramics hold both of those energies at the same time. You’re simultaneously taking something that’s a liquid and building it up into something solid, but then you’re also very much carving back into it and reducing it again when it’s fired and hardening. That’s not unique to ceramics, but I do think that the relationship between something being both fluid and solid that has always felt interesting to me, related to what a human body is.” - Erin Jane Nelson

8. Where in this piece can you see evidence of the subtractive and additive process of making sculpture and working with ceramics?

9. What other elements or ideas might this sculpture, and its title, “hold at the same time?”

10. Nelson combines smooth, flat surfaces with protruding forms in this sculpture. Which surfaces do you find yourself drawn to in this sculpture, and how might you create different depths and types of surfaces in your assemblages?
Art Making
Material Networks

Students will create a sculptural assemblage using clay, and incorporate natural and manufactured materials. The assemblage will include close-up photographs of plants or animals in their home environments as a starting point, to inspire connections depicting the ways networks and human relationships to natural or organic systems are changing and adapting in response to long-term seasonal changes, and other felt effects of climate change.

Materials

- A device for taking photographs
- Access to a printer
- Discarded manufactured objects, including plastic or glass bottles, ceramic dishes, metal or wood fixtures
- Recycled magazines, newspapers, and other print media (mail, posters)
- Organic matter from trees, plants and/or flowers: leaves, bark, twigs, grasses, or flower petals. *If collecting outside, use items already on the ground, unless you have access to a garden where you have permission to harvest. You might also gather some dirt, soil, or sand.*

Art Making Procedure (1–2 or more classes)

1. Start by selecting a subject to photograph, which might include pets, plants, or animals you find at home or outside.
2. Record (either on paper or in your mind) notes on your observations of texture, color, shape, and patterns of physical traits, mood, and behavior of plants and animals. Note how these changes over several days with weather, human-animal interactions, and other factors. If you notice trends or patterns in moods or behaviors in relation to weather patterns, make note of these.
3. Print your images, arrange them in different configurations, and begin thinking about how they connect to changes in the local environment and resulting changes in animal-animal, plant-plant or plant-animal, plant-human and animal-human networks.
4. Look for natural and manufactured materials and objects that you think relate or communicate with the photographs, gathering the objects at home, at school, or on the street. These should include organic materials like tree bark, leaves, flower petals, wild grasses and flowers, soil, dirt and/or sand (as long as you have permission to harvest them, or you find them already uprooted or on the ground).
5. If you have access to clay, experiment with hand-building shapes and forms that complement your photographs and objects, placing objects and photographs in and around the clay.
6. If you are making salt dough, follow the instructions in this video, measuring out equal table salt and warm or boiled water, and twice as much flour (¼ cup flour to ¼ cup salt and ¼ cup water), adding salt, and then slowly mixing water into the flour-salt mixture until it forms a sticky, pliable consistency.
7. If you collected soil or sand, consider adding it to your clay, or putting it inside a recycled container or other object in your assemblage. You can add water to change its state and consistency, so you can mold it. After molding clay, sand, and/or soil, either wait for it to dry or follow the instructions for baking the salt dough. Arrange your photographs and other objects in and/or around the clay or soil. Experiment with different arrangements before permanently attaching anything.
8. Use glue, tape, needle and thread, or other adhesives to attach your objects and photographs to each other and the clay.
9. Think about the surfaces of your artwork. What kind of textures relate to your photographs and your ideas about the relationship between the animal or plant you photographed, the local climate and change? Use paint, paint markers, oil pastels, or other media to add texture and color, or use cut paper or cardboard collage for similar effect.
Wrap Up: To conclude the activities, students share their mixed media assemblages, either in small groups or whole group conversations, virtually or in person. Students might also share observations from their journaling about changes in weather patterns, and moods or behaviors of plants, animals and themselves.

Reflection: Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheets, or journaling:

1. How did close observations of yourself, plants, and animals, whether at home or in your community, provide new insights into environmental networks and systems in response to long-term seasonal and climatic changes?

2. What kinds of materials did you collect and choose to include in your assemblage? How did these relate to your photographs?

3. If you chose to use clay, soil, sand, and/or make salt dough, how did the process of shaping and forming the clay influence your understanding of surfaces through touch? How did you decide where to incorporate found materials?

4. What new observations did you make about your local environment and climate? Did you discover trends in mood or behavior in response to seasonal and/or climatic changes? How might these discoveries influence choices you make in the future, including your interactions with materials, plants, and animals?